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SUMMER 2025

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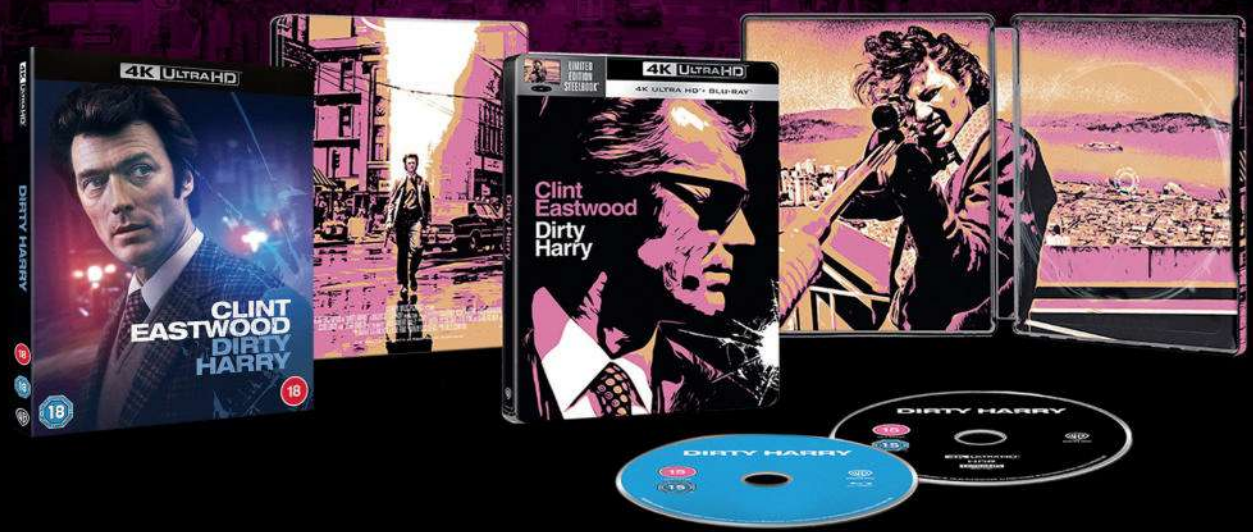

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WELCOME

Be afraid. Be very afraid. Life finds a way again in *Jurassic World Rebirth*.

THE FIRST *JURASSIC* trilogy ended in 2001 with the spectacle of Pteranodons soaring alongside a helicopter. The second ended in 2022 with two Sinoceratops marching with a herd of elephants in Africa. Over six blockbuster movies, we've had a whole heap of oohing, aahing, running and screaming: you'd be forgiven for thinking that at this point Hollywood must be fresh out of dinosaur juice. But cinema finds a way. And a new scientist has arrived to bring the franchise back from extinction, tinkering with the formula, splicing things together and adding his own ingredients (to the best of our knowledge, these do not include frog DNA).

Gareth Edwards, a filmmaker who has more experience with monsters than Van Helsing, is the man behind *Jurassic World Rebirth*. He has dropped in a mega-famous movie star, Scarlett Johansson, to head up the human contingent. As for the dinosaurs, well, prepare for the "worst of the worst", not least an unholy new creation called the Distortus Rex, something you won't find in the Natural History Museum. Our Dan Jolin had incredible access, spending days on the set and edit suite of *Rebirth*; head to page 46 to find out from Edwards, Johansson and more what they've been cooking up in that lab. And why exactly the director is comparing his new T-Rex to Javier Bardem.

Don't worry: we've managed to contain the dinosaurs to only ten pages of this issue. Entirely unmenaced by rampaging carnivores was Sydney Sweeney, who took time out from shooting Season 3 of *Euphoria* to talk to Rebecca Nicholson about her meteoric rise — as well as to take part in a sumptuous photoshoot riffing on Old Hollywood glamour. And not perturbed in the slightest by the thump of prehistoric footsteps were the makers of *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, who invited us on set to meet a robot named H.E.R.B.I.E. (lovely chap, firm handshake).

Enjoy the issue. Oh, and best read it fast — we can only hold off the beasts for so long.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Tim McDonagh

Brighton-based Tim brought to life *Jurassic World Rebirth*'s monstrous Distortus Rex, looming out of jungle foliage. Go to mcdonaghillustration.com to see more of his excellent work.

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION

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"I've literally just sent an angry dog GIF to HR."

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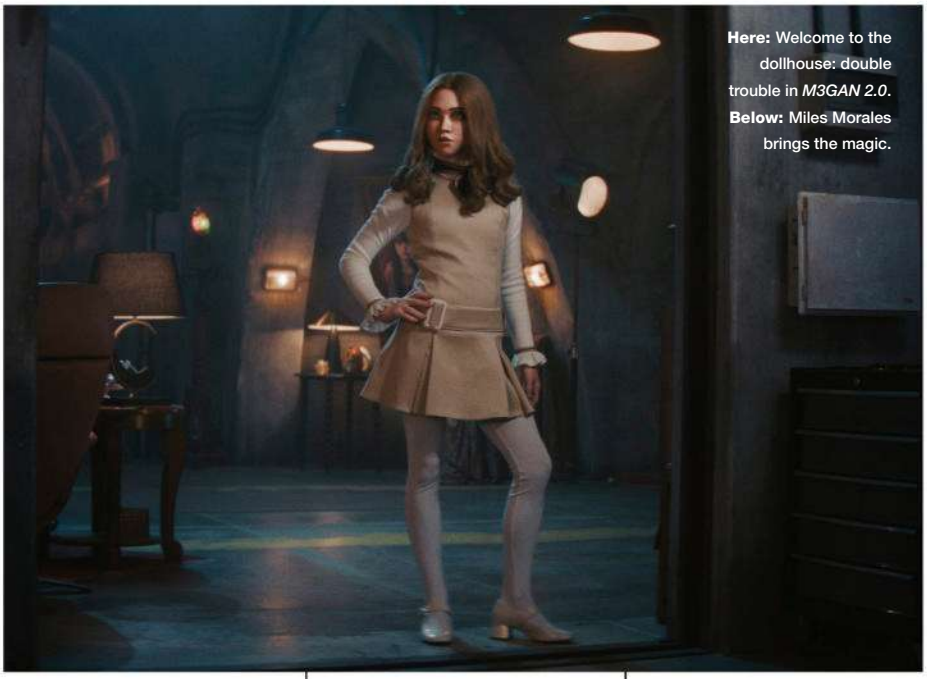

Here: Welcome to the dollhouse: double trouble in *M3GAN 2.0*. **Below:** Miles Morales brings the magic.

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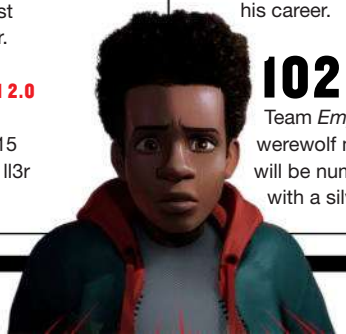

DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

DAN JOLIN WENT ON THE SET OF *JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH*

"After a lifetime of eagerly watching dinosaurs, I finally got to walk with some… Well, sort of: I watched some people wearing Velociraptor hats stalk Scarlett Johansson and Jonny Bailey. But it was still thrilling – especially with Gareth Edwards behind the camera, living his own childhood dream."

JOANNA MORAN FLEW TO LA FOR A PHOTOSHOOT WITH SYDNEY SWEENEY

"One cold, crisp morning in LA (yes, they happen!) we headed to a studio in Culver City with Sydney, one of the most exciting young actors around, but with a classic Hollywood charm that we wanted to lean into. And who better than LA photography legend Art Streiber to absolutely nail the old-school glamour?"

CHRIS HEWITT HOSTED A Q&A WITH DIRECTOR GARETH EVANS

"We unleashed *HAVOC* upon London's Curzon Bloomsbury for our latest Empire VIP Club event, as I spoke to the film's director, Gareth Evans, after a screening of his new movie. But don't worry, we tidied up afterwards and washed all the blood off the seats."

Newsstand cover: Universal Pictures, Amblin Entertainment and ILM. This spread: Tim McDonagh, Sony, Jasin Boland/Universal Pictures and Amblin Entertainment, Universal Pictures, Marco Vittur, Spinelines issue 440: Newsstand: "Jaws Theta Chi!" is from *Monsters University*. Subs: "Oh my God. I swallowed that gold coin." "Nice going, Jaws!" is from *Leprechaun*

EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

SHARK TALE

So, *Jaws*' 50th anniversary [Cover story, issue #440]. When I was at primary school I had a teacher, Mrs Major, who had family living in America, and every year in the summer holidays she would go and visit them. One year, she came back and showed us the photos she'd taken while visiting Martha's Vineyard of a film crew and a rubber shark on the beach on a rig/trailer. My mind was blown when *Jaws* was released! I always wonder what happened to those photos and if her family realised what a piece of cinematic history they were.

PETER HANNIS, VIA EMAIL

A story worthy of the USS Indianapolis! For being an early adopter of our favourite bad fish, have a Picturehouse membership, on us.

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ON THE *FANTASTIC FOUR* TRAILER:
"Who makes those giant shoes for Galactus?"
NIKOLAJ H. CHRISTENSEN

I-DON'T-SPY

Great ranking of the Tony Scott movies [The Ranking, issue #439]! The hits just keep on coming. But seriously, how could you not have included *Spy Game* in this top ten? It includes Robert Redford, Brad Pitt, a great score, and a fantastic ending! Watch the training-montage scene and tell me I'm wrong. I dare you, I double dare you. (Okay, wrong reference, but you get the point.)

DANIEL VAN SCHIJNDEL, THE NETHERLANDS

I'll have what she's having! (Okay, also the wrong reference, but we get the point too.)

ON THE NEW OSCARS STUNT CATEGORY:
"I actually pumped my fist on this packed commuter train. I have been shouting about this for so long."
@LAURENDAMON.BSKY.SOCIAL

CLUTCHING PERLS

I love *Empire*. I'm glad the latest issue has a retrospective look-back with Ron Perlman at his earlier roles [Time Capsule, issue #439]. But how on earth could you leave *Police Academy 7* out? What a missed opportunity. I'm of course joking, but as a big fan of *Police Academy 1 to 4*, I'd read any articles about these slapstick classics.

BALÁZS FARKAS, HUNGARY

[Michael Winslow sound effect.]

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WITH STUNTS NOW RECOGNISED, WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE AS A NEW OSCAR CATEGORY?

Best Practical Effects.
@AUTOGLOCKTAVIUS.BSKY.SOCIAL

Best awarding of an Academy Award.
@SCREENONE.BSKY.SOCIAL

Best Animated Performance (shared by voice-actor/animators).
@WILLIAMBIBBIANI.BSKY.SOCIAL

Best Boy.
@LIFESAPITCHPODCAST.BSKY.SOCIAL

Best Ensemble Cast.
@AMAZESTRONG.BSKY.SOCIAL

Best Canadian City Masquerading As More Famous And Expensive US City.
@DAVIDJONFULLER.BSKY.SOCIAL

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PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

THE ORIGINAL *JURASSIC PARK* COVER AUGUST 1993

The fossil records are clear: *Empire* has always been dino-obsessed. Back in 1993, we went full *Jurassic*, reporting on the original film's box-office draw ("shattered more records than a frustrated Radio One DJ", we noted); recognising early the film's greatness in a five-star review ("This, for once, is a blockbuster deserving of the name"); *and* we even visited the set, witnessing a Velociraptor scuttle past the camera.

Prophetically, Steven Spielberg recognised how the film's ground-breaking CGI heralded a sea-change for cinema. "I don't think we can ring the death-knell on [practical effects]," he told us. "But when the time comes, that's a day I will mourn. And that day is coming. I'll move into the technology, because that technique will be the only way filmmakers with big imaginations will be able to afford them." Hold on to your butts.

HAS ARNIE MET HIS MATCH? Tom Hibbert Vs. The Last Action Hero!
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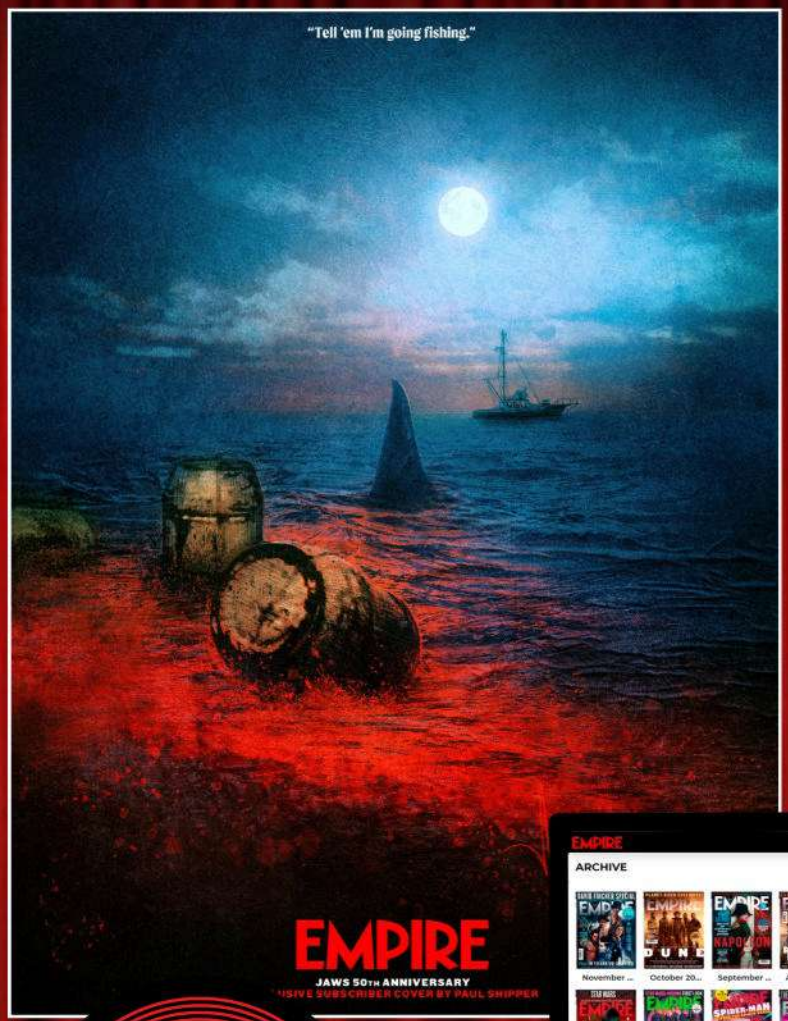

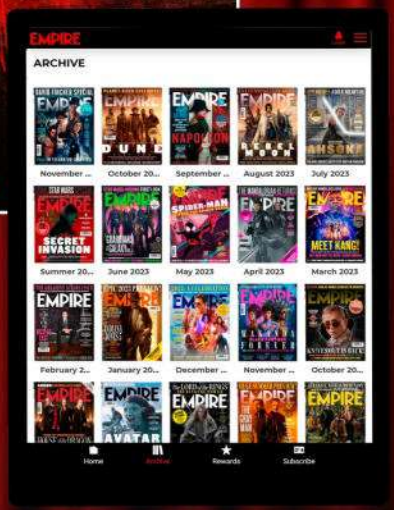

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

SUMMER 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

The robot who's here to help

THE SECRET WEAPON IN THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS? LOVEABLE SIDEKICK H.E.R.B.I.E.

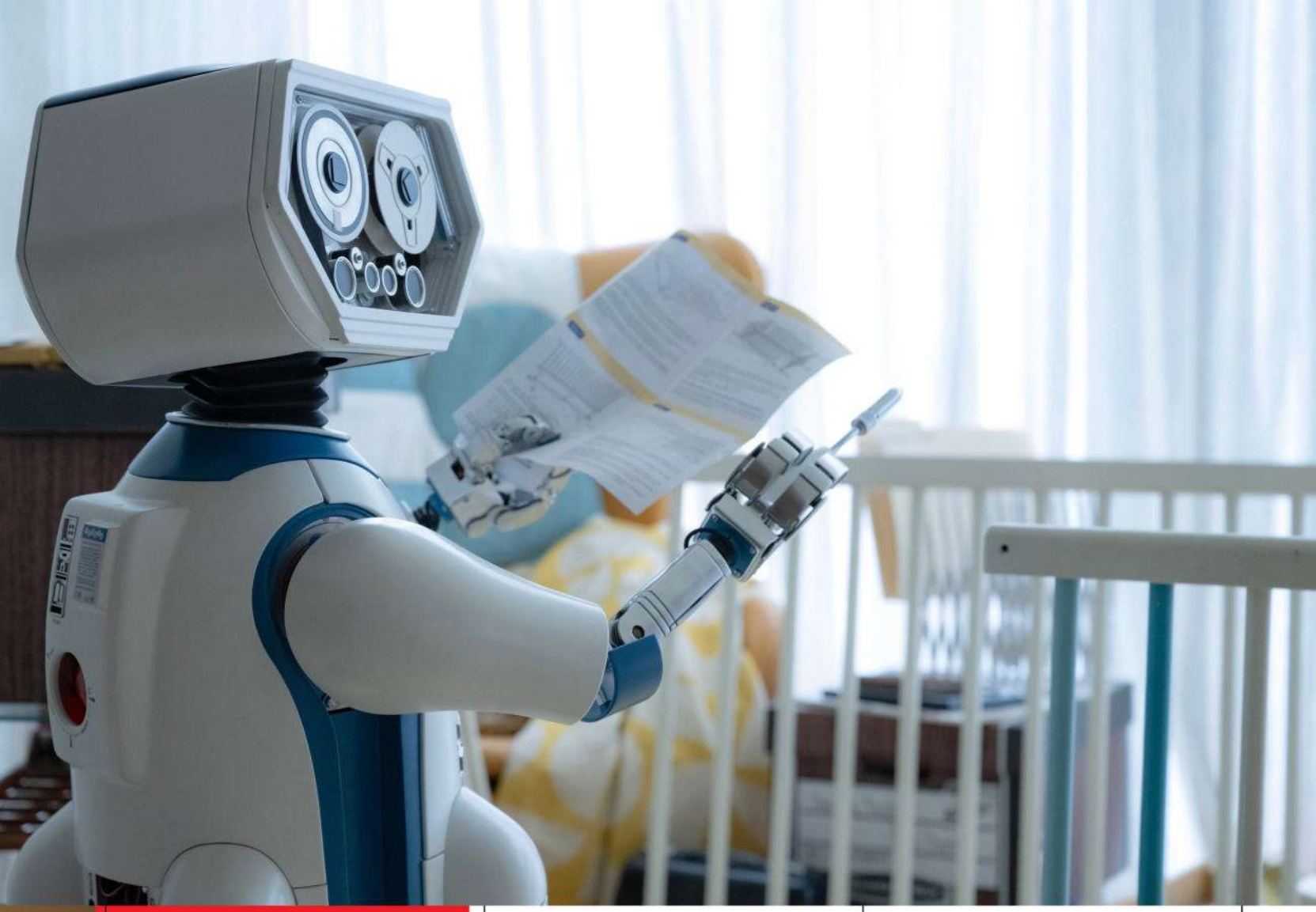
WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

R2-D2. MARVIN. BAYMAX. The Tin Man. Johnny 5. WALL•E. Paulie's pal in *Rocky IV*. Cinema history is littered with iconically cute robots; endearing droids practically pre-programmed to be adorable. A new entrant hopes to join their metallic ranks this summer, in Marvel's upcoming retro-futuristic romp *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*. Everyone, say hello to H.E.R.B.I.E.

"He's absolutely as important and as alive as any other member of the cast," insists the film's director Matt Shakman, entirely seriously. "He's sometimes a slightly put-upon robot, but he is definitely a member of the family. He's just so charming and adorable." This is not an exaggeration: H.E.R.B.I.E. was at one point a full, card-carrying member of the Fantastic Four superhero team line-up.

Due to thrillingly dry copyright reasons, the 1978 Hanna-Barbera series *The New Fantastic Four* could not include Johnny Storm, as the television rights belonged elsewhere. Needing an extra teammate to make up the numbers — no-one wants The Fantastic Three — H.E.R.B.I.E. was born. Or rather, invented. "He's a Reed Richards creation," says Shakman. "He is the highest-evolution robot of our era. He is really Reed's right hand in the lab, capable of assisting him on any sort of experiment, always by his side, whether in New York City or out in space." He's also a dab hand in the kitchen — "He's working on a pasta sauce there," the director reveals, of the photo below right — and crib-building poses no problems (see pic above). And he's not the only one of his kind.

Yes, there will be other H.E.R.B.I.E.s in this film, "doing errands, walking dogs, working as butlers". It's all part of the world-building involved in this alternate corner of the MCU, a unique retro-futuristic world which melds optimistic futurism with a 1960s period setting. Leaning on the original animated design, Marvel's head of visual development, Ryan Meinerding, "led the charge on H.E.R.B.I.E.'s design," says Shakman. "[The robot's] eyes are old computer discs, and a lot of his vocalisation comes from computers of that era." Veteran sound editor Matthew Wood — who was Oscar-nominated for his work on WALL•E, and



provided the vocals for *Star Wars*' General Grievous — is behind his voice.

Back in September 2024, *Empire* witnessed all this first-hand, meeting H.E.R.B.I.E. in person at the Pinewood Studios set of *The Fantastic Four*. We watch as a stand-in for H.E.R.B.I.E. — a wooden puppet, operated by a man in a grey onesie, to be replaced in post-production — interacts with the Fantastic Four in the Baxter Building lab. Then we are taken out to a workshop, where SFX supervisor Alistair Williams and his team are rehearsing with a more complete remote-control version of the robot — "powered by a giant lawnmower battery", Williams notes.

Above: H.E.R.B.I.E. vs. instruction manual. **Below:** Stirring the pot. **Far left:** With Ebon Moss-Bachrach as the Thing. **Left:** The Thing with Invisible Woman (Vanessa Kirby), Mister Fantastic (Pedro Pascal) and the Human Torch (Joseph Quinn).

(As with many other elements of the film, a blend of practical and CGI effects will be used to bring H.E.R.B.I.E. to life.)

There are four H.E.R.B.I.E.s in total used for filming. "Our 'prime' one has fully moving head and arms," explains Williams. "We've had him driving around the set, cleaning, picking up toys, serving Martinis..." With four crew members at the controls twiddling various knobs, this prime H.E.R.B.I.E. is remarkably expressive and lifelike, shaking *Empire*'s hand as if a shy little metal child. It's hard not to fall in love with him.

"He is definitely playful," says Shakman. "He's charming, he's funny — but he also will break your heart. Which I hope is emblematic of the movie." Far from being simply a goofy robotic sidekick, the filmmakers are keen to give H.E.R.B.I.E. as much emotional ballast as the rest of the team. "This is a movie about family and children and parental anxiety and all the things that come along with being first-time parents: hopes and dreams. H.E.R.B.I.E. is definitely a key part of that emotional journey." Is it too late to rename it 'The Fantastic Five'?

***THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 25 JULY**

Re-igniting a hot-headed rivalry

IDRIS ELBA AND JOHN CENA ON REVIVING THEIR ONSCREEN FEUD VIA ACTION-COMEDY HEADS OF STATE

WORDS **IANA MURRAY**

IDRIS ELBA AND John Cena had some unresolved business. On the final day of shooting 2021's *The Suicide Squad*, Elba had a proposition for his co-star: "I said, 'John, seriously, I want to work with you again,'" Elba recalls. Cena wholeheartedly agreed. As Bloodsport and Peacemaker respectively, their characters had a combative rivalry fuelled by petty upmanship — an infectiously fun dynamic they didn't want to leave behind.

Cue *Heads Of State*, a political action-comedy from *Nobody* director Ilya Naishuller that builds on the natural chemistry Cena and Elba had discovered on *The Suicide Squad*. In fact, their experience on the set of James Gunn's film directly informed their characters. Earlier iterations of the script had a more serious tone, but the pair considered lightening up the story with an energy more reminiscent of their superhero counterparts. "I suggested I could be a little more animated, and that leads to embarrassing moments," says Cena, who plays Will Derringer, a former movie star and recently elected President of the United States. His relative inexperience in office leads him to butt heads with Elba's seasoned UK Prime Minister, Sam Clarke, who's struggling at the job; the "machinations and pressure of politics have started to wear him down", Elba explains.

Sam and Will bring out the worst in each other, doing anything, says Cena, to "get an extra jab or the last word in". The cordial niceties of politics collapse in the face of an undying, childish beef. "Although we're elected professionals, we're like two little kids."

The pair are forced to put aside their differences when they find themselves at the centre of an international plot to take them both down. As Naishuller explains: "The real story is not whether they will survive, because we know they will" — this is Idris Elba and John Cena, after all — "but will they become friends?"

It all kicks off on Air Force One. In June 2023, *Empire* went to see for ourselves at London's Longcross Studios, where a life-sized replica of the jet's fuselage — split into a three-part rotating rig made to recreate a plane crash — has been constructed for a major set-piece. Elsewhere on the lot, the stunt team prepares for another sequence: a car chase through Trieste, Italy, involving half a dozen vehicles and a brawl in 'The Beast', the heavily armoured Presidential state car. Here, though, things are less rowdy — for now. Despite a ground-shaking boom rattling through the soundstage as the crew test out how the missile attack will send Air Force One tumbling down, Cena and Idris are unperturbed, lounging on the cabin's upholstered seats. Just another day on set.

Despite all the mayhem unfolding, Naishuller is more focused on hitting comedy beats. "I knew I could do the action — I can do that in my sleep," the director says. After chaotic, POV-shot debut *Hardcore Henry* and Bob Odenkirk-fronted vengeance-fest *Nobody*, he has more than proved his ability to stage audacious, balls-to-the-wall stunts — but for his third feature, the filmmaker wanted to emulate classic double-act crowd-pleasers like *Midnight Run* and *Lethal Weapon*, where the laughs are just as potent as the thrills. "One thing I loved about the script is that it was funny and a bit nostalgic," Elba concurs. "It felt like a film that they used to make in the '90s."

Top to bottom: US President Will Derringer (John Cena) and UK Prime Minister Sam Clarke (Idris Elba) are in for an explosive time; Going great guns; Director Ilya Naishuller with Cena and Elba on set.

All great buddy comedies succeed on the strength of their leading duo, and *Heads Of State* relies on the unlikely dynamic between its two stars. Flexing their literal and comedic muscles has reminded the actors why they loved working together so much. "He's someone that absolutely makes me better, because he's so damn good," says Cena of his co-star. Elba was equally inspired by his scene partner. "No-one can go tit-for-tat with John's banter, because he's like Rain Man," he counters. "He's like Jay-Z with the improv." Here's a real clash of the titans.

***HEADS OF STATE* IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 2 JULY**

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... MARTIN SCORSESE'S HAWAIIAN CRIME DRAMA

IT'S BASED ON A REAL-LIFE POLYNESIAN TURF WAR

Tantalisingly described as a Hawaiian *GoodFellas*-meets-*The Departed*, Martin Scorsese's return to Mob moviemaking is set to chart the hitherto untold true story of Polynesian crime boss Wilford 'Nappy' Pulawa and his battle for control of Hawaii's criminal underworld against rival gangs and corporations throughout the late '60s and early '70s. Billed as "the last great American Mob saga", it's as much a story of cultural survival as it is of criminal enterprise.

IT WAS PITCHED BY DWAYNE JOHNSON AND EMILY BLUNT

The *Jungle Cruise* co-stars, who'll next be seen on screen together in Benny Safdie's upcoming MMA biopic *The Smashing Machine*, are actually the ones who pitched the movie to Scorsese and long-time collaborator Leonardo DiCaprio. Johnson, whose Hawaiian roots run deep, has been trying to make a movie on the island for years, lending his and Blunt's pitch a personal edge that Marty clearly couldn't resist.

LEO IS ON BOARD TO STAR

DiCaprio and Scorsese have no shortage of projects in the pipeline, including long-gestating crime epic *The Devil In The White City* and an Apple TV+-bound adaptation of Pulitzer Prize winner Marilynne Robinson's *Home*. Even so, a Hawaiian *GoodFellas* was just too tasty an opportunity for DiCaprio to pass up, meaning we can expect to see the Oscar-winning star opposite Johnson and Blunt in the film.

AN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST WILL PEN THE SCRIPT

Over the years, Scorsese has worked with some of Hollywood's leading screenwriters — from Paul Schrader to Eric Roth. But for this deep dive into a pivotal piece of Polynesian history, the legendary auteur has tapped *Vanity Fair* special correspondent and *NYT* bestselling author Nick Bilton to co-write with Johnson. If Bilton's eye-opening Dark Web exposé *American Kingpin* is anything to go by, Scorsese's movie is in safe hands.

EXPECT THE ROCK TO LAYETH THE SMACKDOWN

In a March Instagram post, Dwayne Johnson expressed gratitude for "the most creatively inspiring time" of his career, shouting out "the maestro Marty Scorsese" personally. And having both pulled off an R-rated return to the WWE and gotten into monstrous shape for *The Smashing Machine* in the last year, the prospect of seeing Johnson ostensibly playing a Polynesian Jimmy The Gent has us all kinds of hyped. With filming looking set to take place next year, we'll smell — and see — what The Rock is cooking very soon... **JORDAN KING**

On A Role

OWEN WILSON IS PRYCE 'STICK' CAHILL

THE ACTOR PLAYS A WASHED-UP GOLF PRO IN *STICK*

WORDS **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE SWING

Wilson had two years of professional golf lessons to convince as the one-time Ryder Cup star who's traded putting for patter, smooth-talking punters into buying expensive equipment at a club. "My dad was a good golfer and both my brothers played, but I didn't learn," he says. "My excuse was I was left-handed and they only had righty clubs." He studied golf legends ("I love Seve Ballesteros... such a great swashbuckler") and watched 1996 sports romance *Tin Cup* ("Costner had a good swing"), but mainly he practised, practised, practised. In secret. "I went out to play with Luke [Wilson, his brother]. I was out-driving him. He was like, 'Holy shit, I can't believe this. I thought it was going to be like taking some kid and watching him stumble around.'"

Top to bottom: The Pryce is right: Owen Wilson as Stick; Seve Ballesteros, one of the world's all-time greatest golfers; Swinging time: Kevin Costner in *Tin Cup*.

THE LOOK

In the ten-part series created by *Ford v Ferrari* scribe Jason Keller, Wilson's titular character really dresses the part of a guy at home on the green, donning some pretty preppy attire. "It was like seeing Sting in *Quadrophenia*, when he's a bellboy," chuckles Wilson. Though sheepish about wearing it at first, Wilson warmed to the golf world's very particular fashion sense, and now has a wardrobe full of spiffy apparel. "I've moved past that self-consciousness," he says, "to: 'Okay, I look good in a V-neck sweater, with a collared shirt, and my shirt tucked in.'"

THE ANGUISH

With eight episodes directed by *Little Miss Sunshine*'s Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, it's no surprise that *Stick*'s many laughs are balanced with moments of real torment: Pryce is going through a divorce after the loss of a child, while the protégé he coaches is a troubled teen. Wilson brought the pain by accessing his own experiences. "I remember working on a movie early on and I couldn't cry — they had to blow these menthol things in my eyes," he smiles. "I didn't really train as an actor so I have a slight insecurity — 'Oh, I can't really change my accent the way these guys do' — and I used to always think that being able to cry on cue, 'Oh, that's a real actor.' Now, it's no problem. As you get older, more things have happened, and maybe you're more connected." He doesn't use music to get to a sad place, but does to pump himself up: "I had to do something where I was a bit manic and I was listening to [The Clash's] 'Clash City Rockers'."

THE PRO CO-STARS

The fairways of *Stick* are sprinkled with cameos by such PGA stars as Collin Morikawa, Max Homa, Wyndham Clark and Keegan Bradley. "I got starstruck," Wilson confesses. "I was getting my picture taken with them to send to my friends who play golf." But when "Action!" was called, he got his head back in the game. "It's about performing," he stresses. "You feel some nerves, but you have to deal with it. I got starstruck with Jack Nicholson [on *How Do You Know*]. I was very nervous with De Niro on *Meet The Parents*. Then I was able to steady myself and do an okay job." Here's hoping it all leads to a hole in one.

***STICK* IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 4 JUNE**

Alamy, Apple TV+, Getty Images, Imago

THE BOY WHO LIVES AGAIN

WITH SIX ACTORS CONFIRMED, THE HARRY POTTER HBO SERIES INCHES CLOSER TO OUR MUGGLE SCREENS

OVER THE COURSE of ten years and eight mostly spellbinding movies, Warner Bros.' big-screen *Harry Potter* adaptations birthed stars, cemented legends, and dominated popular culture. Now some 14 years (and a few *Fantastic Beasts* films) since the final film hit screens, *Succession* alumni Mark Mylod and Francesca Gardiner are mounting their own ambitious, decade-spanning TV retelling at HBO. But while discourse surrounding controversial franchise creator J. K. Rowling and whether there's need for a reboot rages on, the series' first wave of casting announcements is here, creating more buzz than a stray snitch.

John Lithgow — who had already spoken openly about the project — is now officially set to fill the slippers of the late Richard Harris and Michael Gambon as Professor Albus Dumbledore. It's a major show of faith in the project from the 79-year-old American screen icon, who reckons playing Hogwarts' headmaster will likely "define the last chapter of my life".

Also joining Hogwarts' new-look staff are Nick Frost as lovable gamekeeper Hagrid; Paapa Essiedu as Potions Master Professor Snape; Janet McTeer as Gryffindor head-of-house Minerva McGonagall; National Theatre alum Luke Thallon as Professor Quirrell; and Paul Whitehouse, who'll play crotchety caretaker Argus Filch.

Top to bottom: Getting ready to create some onscreen magic: John Lithgow; Janet McTeer; Paapa Essiedu; Paul Whitehouse; Nick Frost; an owl.

Despite it still being unknown who of the 32,000 kids who have auditioned will be our new Harry, Ron and Hermione, or if those Cillian Murphy Voldemort rumours hold water, these casting decisions nevertheless offer fresh insight into Mylod and Gardiner's *Potter* plans. While the original films' tradition of pedestaling British comic heavyweights and theatre-bred actors endures, Essiedu's casting reaffirms Mylod and Gardiner's commitment to making this a more diverse — and book-accurate — wizarding world than we've seen before. At 34, Essiedu is much closer to the novels' thirtysomething Snape than Alan Rickman, who was 54 when he first donned Severus' black robe.

And speaking of book-accuracy, there's a growing sense that a darker take on the Wizarding World awaits this time around. The source material is stacked with shocking things that never made it into the films: Neville's visit to St Mungo's; Tom Riddle hanging rabbits; the Gaunts. And given the creative leads are known for the likes of *The Menu* and *Succession* — and their season-per-book plan for the reboot — it seems likely they might be preparing to delve deeper into the books' odder, creepier corners than the films dared to go.

With shooting due to get underway on the original movies' Leavesden soundstages this summer ahead of a planned 2026 air-date, all will be Revelio-ed soon enough. **JORDAN KING**

THE FIRING LINE

BILL HADER'S RECENT ACCOUNT OF A PRE-ACTING SACKING PUTS HIM IN ELITE COMPANY

BILL HADER

CINEMA USHER

Hader confessed to revealing the ending of *Titanic* to a sorority while working as an usher in his teens. A sackable offence in a pre-social-media age — done in retaliation to the girls comparing him to Charles Manson — Hader was asked to leave the job almost immediately.

MADONNA

DUNKIN' DONUTS SERVER

While hoping to break big in 1978 in NYC, Madonna spent a short time at the popular chain. "I was playing with the jelly squirter machine," the pop icon confessed in an interview with Howard Stern. One week and several "pissed off" managers later, Madge was let go.

ROBERT REDFORD

STANDARD OIL ROUSTABOUT

Teen Redford did jobs on oil rigs before he was found napping in a tank he'd been assigned to clean. He was then moved to forklift-driving in a bottle-washing plant, which ended exactly how you'd expect it to (cocky forklift driver + bottle-laden forklift = disaster).

HARRISON FORD

HOSPITAL CHEF

Want to convince your employer your CV isn't fake? Don't sever your finger on your first shift. "The sew-your-finger-back-on department was down the hall, and after that was where they fire you for lying," Ford recalled. A resounding, "No, chef." **BETH WEBB**

When gun-fu meets tutus

BALLERINA'S ANA DE ARMAS AND LEN WISEMAN ON THEIR BOLD, BLOODY *JOHN WICK* SPIN-OFF

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

THE *JOHN WICK* franchise is rich with mythology. Amid all the bullets and broken bones there's an all-powerful High Table, and a building full of tattooed 'Accountants'. In *Ballerina* — a new, Ana de Armas-fronted chapter in the story — a significant corner of the *Wick*-iverse is explored: Ruska Roma, the dancer-fronted assassin academy where Keanu Reeves' antihero Baba Yaga was born. This time we meet Eve Macarro (de Armas), a recent Ruska Roma graduate with a similar appetite for revenge. Here, she and director Len Wiseman tell *Empire* how they put their own spin on the wild *Wick* formula.

How did you first start working together on *Ballerina*?
Len Wiseman: Ana, I came to you when we were more in the development phase. We started to elaborate on [the idea] and fine-tune it.
Ana de Armas: Len is someone that's so game. His imagination is really out there, and he doesn't shy away from the action in these films. It was really fun to see his vision and the scenes that he was imagining. Sometimes I was even like, 'What are you talking about?', in a good way. One of the things I think is the magic of the *John Wick* universe is how creative and fun they are with the action. So we have a lot of room to go crazy with it. And Len definitely wanted to.
Wiseman: At that stage, I was buying ice skates and putting blood on them, and I'd shoot these videos and send them to Ana. There was a lot of the back and forth of creating. Everything we would go through, [Ana] was like, "But I get to do that, right?" She was incredibly game right back.

How does Eve differ from John as a central character?
Wiseman: Eve is becoming an assassin, whereas John Wick is essentially the opposite, as somebody trying to get out.
De Armas: She's just starting. When you're young, and that emotional, that rage and instinct of going for what you want means you approach the job differently. She's feeling everything, which means she makes mistakes. And I did want to find a way of having fun with the fights, but at the same time I was like, "Len, I'm a small woman. I'm a little person compared to all the men in this movie."
Wiseman: [Eve]'s got to be more clever, and use what's around her. She has a different rhythm and vibe than John, and that was our intention. Early on, I said, "I'm not looking to do a female John Wick." This is an entirely different, cool, interesting, layered character, and badass in her own right.

What was the most challenging piece of action to pull off?
De Armas: Everything was hard. Really, really hard. What comes to mind was [shooting exterior sequences] because it was extremely cold. They had to put screws on my shoes so I wouldn't slip on the frozen streets. I think this movie was physically challenging, but even more so mentally.

What does the ballet element lend to the film?
De Armas: I can totally get why they would teach ballet to these people; it's one of the

Clockwise from main: Killing Eve: Ana de Armas as the dancing assassin; Eve — not a fan of a man in uniform; Director Len Wiseman on set with de Armas; Keanu Reeves gets on Eve's Wick.

hardest disciplines you could imagine.

Wiseman: Most of the time when we're seeing a beautiful ballet, the ballerinas are in an immense amount of pain. Their toes are bleeding, they're taping themselves up, their legs are giving out. I get how that relates to an assassin — [they're] putting on a graceful performance but having to fight through the pain.

Keanu Reeves does appear as Wick in the film. How was it to collaborate with him on it?

De Armas: He's very excited about this movie. Immediately when we reached out to him, he was on board and wanted to be in it. I've been in two previous films with Keanu [*Knock Knock* and *Exposed*], and I just didn't think he was gonna throw me on the floor this many times! It was a whole different environment to be in with him. On his last day, he was already telling Len ideas for the next one...

***BALLERINA* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 6 JUNE**

Lionsgate, Niko Tavernise, Warner Bros.

YEAH, WE'RE THINKING HE'S BACK

CHAD STAHELSKI GIVES US A WORLD-FIRST SCOOP ON THE FUTURE OF JOHN WICK

"I'LL GIVE YOU an obtuse answer — you'll be the first one I give it to." Chad Stahelski is speaking with *Empire* post-CinemaCon 2025. Not only was the thrilling return of Keanu Reeves' suited-and-booted assassin in *John Wick 5* confirmed at the flagship event, but a franchise-expanding animated prequel and a Donnie Yen-led-and-directed Caine spin-off were announced as well.

It signals a new phase for Stahelski, who made his directorial debut with the first film in 2014. "The saga of John Wick was pretty wrapped up," he says of the fourth film's conclusion, which (spoiler alert) seemingly put the vengeful hero in the ground (literally: we saw his gravestone). "So the only way to do a *5* is to have a new story that involves John Wick. It's not a continuation, with [crime-lord council] the High Table. John dealt with his grief. It will be really different, and everybody [will] see the trailer and go, 'Holy fuck... I gotta see that.'"

Currently in pre-production on his Henry Cavill-fronted *Highlander* remake, Stahelski can't say exactly *when* audiences can expect the showstopping return of Reeves' Baba Yaga, though he will meanwhile appear in the Ana de Armas spin-off *Ballerina* (see left). The filmmaker can confirm, however, that the spin-offs will be completed before *John Wick 5*, and for good reason. "The John Wick TV show [*John Wick: Under The High Table*, announced in 2024] and the animation are big priorities," he says. "Our idea is to try some things and explore some threads and use those two properties to catapult us forward into the ideas for *John 5*."

With each Wick movie larger than the last, in terms of scale, set-pieces and box-office takings, the inevitable question is, can the fifth movie outdo its predecessor? "I've never thought about 'topping' anything," says Stahelski, who prefers experimentation and expansion over simply "blowing up more stuff". He explains: "My stunt team... have ideas for days and we're not scared to try [them out]. *John Wick 4*, you see the seven ideas that made it. You don't see the 200 set-pieces that are fucking horrible. We fail ten times a day more than everybody else, and that's how we get the one thing that's greater than everybody else." It will be good to see you again, Mr Wick.

JAMIE GRAHAM

Taking on the MCU's metallic mantle

Here: Riri Williams/Ironheart (Dominique Thorne).
Below: Series creator and head writer Chinaka Hodge, Anthony Ramos and Manny Montana.

IRONHEART STAR DOMINIQUE THORNE ON GIVING TONY STARK A RUN FOR HIS MONEY

WORDS **LEILA LATIF**

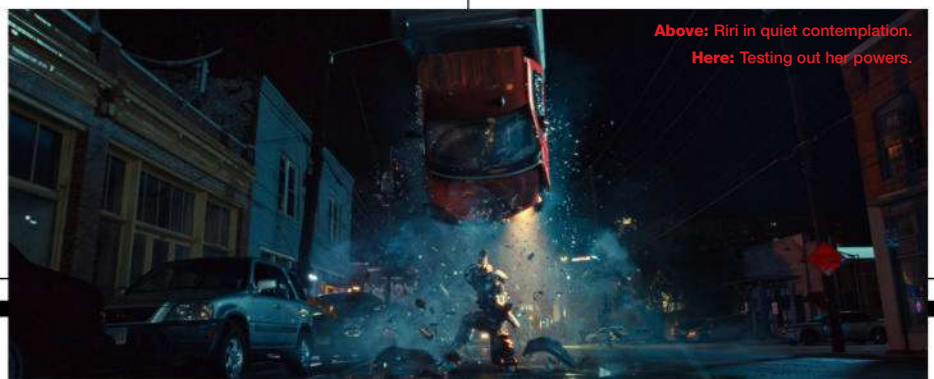
IT'S NO SMALL task filling the boots of a titanium titan like Iron Man. So when Dominique Thorne — star of the upcoming series *Ironheart* — got the seal of approval from the man himself, it was a weight off. "Robert Downey Jr and I spoke just after we wrapped, and he shared some very lovely words about my journey," she tells *Empire*. "He told me how excited he was and that he's rooting for it, too. I literally got two thumbs up. It's really reassuring to know you're not embarrassing Iron Man."

Of course Riri Williams — the Chicago-born MIT student-turned-techy-superhero — is carving her own path away from Marvel's fallen Iron giant as well. Having made her MCU debut in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, where her ace suit-building abilities made her an ally to Shuri and a hero, the character is back on home turf in Illinois, making new armour from scratch. "She's dumpster-diving, whereas Tony Stark [was] this bajillionaire," Thorne explains.

What might seem like a disadvantage turns out to be Williams' strength. In the teen inventor's comic-book debut, 2016's *Invincible Iron Man*, she reverse-engineered one of Stark's famous suits for herself. In the show, she's making her own mark with a white-and-chrome design that's significantly heftier than Williams' teen frame, which boasts detachable limbs and enables her to throw trucks through the air. "Before, they were kind of scrappy, bare-bones pieces of metal she put together, but now what she's able to accomplish is remarkable," promises Thorne.

Which is just as well, as the six-part series sets tech against dark magic when Williams becomes entwined in the master plan of her friend Parker 'The Hood' Robbins (Anthony Ramos). It's a first, bringing MCU action to Chicago's doorstep. But for Thorne, this city setting lends to her character's uniqueness. She also credits poet, playwright and now *Ironheart* creator Chinaka Hodge, who has written extensively on race and gentrification, for "understanding the need to create a different landscape. All her references helped me understand Riri's trajectory to get to this moment, and why now it is her time." She might not have a tower with her name on it, but the day is still young for this self-starting superhero.

IRONHEART IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 25 JUNE



Above: Riri in quiet contemplation.
Here: Testing out her powers.

CANNES-T HARDLY WAIT

TEAM *EMPIRE*'S PICKS FROM THE FLAGSHIP FRENCH FESTIVAL'S PROGRAMME

Mélissa Boros in *Alpha*. **Below left:** June Squibb in *Eleanor The Great*.

ALPHA

ALEX GODFREY, FEATURES EDITOR

After the very brutal one-two punch of *Raw* and *Titane*, and following her Palme d'Or win for the latter, Julia Ducournau is back with *Alpha*. Starring Golshifteh Farahani, Tahar Rahim and newcomer Mélissa Boros, it swirls around an 11-year-old girl in the 1980s, against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic and the grassroots political group ACT UP. Ducournau never holds back, pushing boundaries, smashing barriers, and this is said to be a hugely personal film for her, so steel yourself. I can't wait.

ELEANOR THE GREAT

BETH WEBB, NEWS EDITOR

Ninety-five-year-old June Squibb takes to the Croisette for the first time since 2013's *Nebraska* premiere, this time as the star of Scarlett Johansson's directorial debut. If Squibb's leading role in last year's *Thelma* didn't charm you to your core, this New York-set buddy movie about a nonagenarian forming an unlikely bond with a 19-year-old student (Erin Kellyman) surely will. It may have been decades in the making, but her Cannes moment in the spotlight's finally here.

THE MASTERMIND

JOHN NUGENT, REVIEWS EDITOR

The master of quiet cinema — making an art heist movie? Set during the Vietnam War? American auteur Kelly Reichardt's latest sounds almost as surprising as the time she made a film about the first cow to arrive in Oregon (2019's *First Cow*). How exactly arthouse will meld with art-heist remains to be seen, but with some buzzy names in the cast (Josh O'Connor, John Magaro), here's hoping it shows up bigger than her last film, the criminally-never-released-in-the-UK *Showing Up*.

SENTIMENTAL VALUE

HARRY STAINER, SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR

After traversing adulthood and the choices we make in the melancholic *The Worst Person In The World*, Joachim Trier and Renate Reinsve have reunited for a new family drama. Early reports suggest the film follows actor Nora (Reinsve), whose estranged filmmaker father Gustav (Stellan Skarsgård) tries to reconnect with her after the death of her mother. Given how beautifully *The Worst Person In The World* captured the messiness of navigating your late twenties, it's hard not to get excited at the prospect of this star and director teaming up again.

THE CANNES FILM FESTIVAL WILL RUN FROM 13-24 MAY

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

HARRY STAINER IS THINKING ABOUT... A HOT ADAPTATION

It's rare to see a documentary and want a feature adaptation, but let me bring *Fire Of Love* to the table. Stunning volcanic scenery, a high-risk profession, and a love story powerful enough to shake anyone to their molten core. A John C. Reilly and Tilda Swinton reunion, anyone?

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... A DEWEY REDO

I will be tuning in when the *Malcolm In The Middle* reboot returns (the Hal roller-skating episode is perfect TV). Yet the replacement of Erik Per Sullivan — who played young Dewey — makes me a little sad. Never was a pre-teen performer funnier. Imagine what he could be capable of now?

BEN TRAVIS IS THINKING ABOUT... THE MINECRAFT McFLURRY

Have I ever played *Minecraft*? No. Was I excited for a *Minecraft* movie? Also, no. Has that stopped me eating the tie-in *Minecraft* McFlurry from Maccies? Hell, no! Apple goop, pixelated biscuit bits, a 'sweet and sour' flavour profile… that's film promo with impeccable craft.

Curzon, Sony, Marco Vittur

THE PATH TO PANDORA IN EMPIRE EVERY MONTH

Neytiri strikes back

ZOE SALDAÑA ON HER NA'VI WARRIOR'S EMOTIONAL JOURNEY IN AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

UNTITLED ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD SEQUEL

David Fincher is set to direct **Brad Pitt** in a Quentin Tarantino-written follow-up to QT's own Tinseltown tale for Netflix. This will mark the first time Tarantino has penned a movie without directing it since *From Dusk Till Dawn*.

BE MY BABY

Zendaya will channel rock 'n' roll star Ronnie Spector in a new A24 biopic directed by Barry Jenkins. With a screenplay by regular Luca Guadagnino collaborator David Kajganich, the movie is expected to avert cradle-to-grave convention to immerse viewers in Ronnie's life with husband Phil Spector.

MOSQUITO BOWL

Nicholas Galitzine and Bill Skarsgård have boarded *American Primeval* creator Peter Berg's upcoming World War II Netflix movie. The duo will play two of four real-life American college football stars-turned-Marines who played in an all-time great game while simultaneously preparing to invade Okinawa.

Main: Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña) bares her teeth and her grief in *Fire And Ash*. **Below:** The actor bringing Neytiri to life.

IN HIS *AVATAR* franchise so far, James Cameron has put all of Pandora's residents through the wringer. But in the ongoing battle between the native Na'vi and the humans invading their planet, one character has sacrificed more than any other: Zoe Saldaña's Neytiri. Wife of Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), and mother to their children, Neytiri is a former tsakarem (spiritual leader) of the Omatikaya clan who has given up her home and her birthright, and (spoiler alert for *Avatar: The Way Of Water*) witnessed the brutal death of her eldest child Neteyam (Jamie Flatters) at the hands of the humans. All in an effort to keep her family — primarily Jake — safe.

"We left her in absolute devastation," Saldaña tells *Empire* of Neytiri's mindset at the end of *The Way Of Water*. "It's a level of sadness that is inconceivable, unimaginable." The third film in the series, *Avatar: Fire And Ash* finds Neytiri still grappling with that grief. "That pain is seamlessly followed up on," Saldaña says. "And because it doesn't really have anywhere to go, and doesn't go away, rage can also come from it. [The Sullys] are going to be tested as a family."

Friction was already rising between Neytiri and Jake in *The Way Of Water*, with them clashing over how to parent their rebellious kids, and how to take down Stephen Lang's vengeful Colonel Quaritch. Add in the loss of Neteyam, and the bow-wielding matriarch may well start re-evaluating her priorities. "Not only would everything that's happening compel her to question the bond she has with her husband," Saldaña says, "but also her bond with herself, her people, her land, and the way the Na'vi are. She's going to question everything."

For Saldaña, understanding Neytiri's willingness to defer to Jake has been the most challenging part of embodying her so far. "Getting in the headspace of a woman that, by choice, allows her husband to be head of her family, was very difficult," she explains. "As a little girl I vowed to *never* fall into a situation like that. But once I surrendered, and looked at where she comes from, not from a place of ego, I had a deeper level of admiration."

That deference being somewhat at odds with Neytiri's defiant nature ("She never even adopted the norms of her clan," Saldaña says) has provided fertile ground for the actor, as she continues building upon a character she's played for almost two decades. "She has to make peace with so much more than the humans coming to her planet, and marrying a human's avatar. It's also her making peace with the structures of her people." Those structures will prove troublesome again in *Fire And Ash*, when Neytiri comes up against the formidable Varang (Oona Chaplin), leader of the antagonistic Mangkwan Clan (aka The Ash People). "Neytiri will meet her match," promises Saldaña. "Neytiri doesn't always step into her role, whereas Varang has, and has taken it to a whole new level."

Fire And Ash approaches with Saldaña as a newly minted Oscar-winner, having taken the Best Actress gong at this year's ceremony for her role in the genre-defying *Emilia Pérez* — a film that feels a world away from the blockbusting behemoth that is the *Avatar* franchise. But to her, they're more similar than they first appear. "They're both very nuanced," she explains. "They were risks. They had important messages. I'm deeply proud that my heart has always led me to interesting projects where I've been able to continue evolving." On that evolution, Cameron agrees. "Zoe is incandescent in this film," he tells *Empire*. "With *Emilia Pérez*, she's finally getting recognised as the top-tier actor we've always known she is. But in [*Fire And Ash*], that goes way beyond what you've seen before." Get ready for next-level Neytiri.

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER**

HERSHEY

The story behind American chocolate giant Hershey's will be told by *Mean Girls* director Mark Waters in a new biopic releasing in 2026. What's s'more, Finn Wittrock and **Alexandra Daddario** will co-lead as Milton and Kitty Hershey, around whose love a candy empire was built.

DEATH STRANDING

Hideo Kojima's apocalyptic delivery-simulator video game *Death Stranding* is being given the A24 treatment with a new film from *Pig* director Michael Sarnoski. Sarnoski's movie will reportedly dig deeper into the mysteries surrounding Kojima's game and its haunting world of Beached Things and babies in jars.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any adaptation of Jane Austen's literary classic must have a stacked cast — and Netflix's Dolly Alderton-penned limited series is no exception. **Emma Corrin**, Olivia Colman and Jack Lowden will star as Elizabeth Bennet, Mrs Bennet and Mr Darcy respectively.

MADDEN

John Mulaney, Kathryn Hahn and Sienna Miller are in talks to join Nicolas Cage and Christian Bale in David O'Russell's sports biopic. Cage will play John Madden, the legendary football coach and sports commentator. Production is due to kick off this month in Atlanta.

INCIDENTS AROUND THE HOUSE

Jessica Chastain will headline *Dashcam* director Rob Savage's next chiller. If the movie follows the plot of Josh Malerman's book, we'll see Savage adopt a child's-eye perspective to follow a young girl and her family's encounters with an eerie entity known as 'Other Mother'.

Imago, Getty Images

The Spotlight

Ben Wang

THE *KARATE KID: LEGENDS* ACTOR LEAPS INTO HIS FIRST LEADING MOVIE ROLE

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

JAKE CHESSUM

IT ALL STARTED with cat sick.

Having moved with his family from Shanghai to Minnesota when he was six, Ben Wang learned English by consuming nine hours of television a day. Most helpful of all? Infomercials. "There would always be the same ones," he says now, "with a guy carefully explaining what he was doing. Like, 'Watch how the chamois absorbs your cat's puke,' doing the motion. And I'm like, 'Ah, *absorb*. Yes, *absorption*.'" Fluency followed, as did debut forays into filmmaking: with his grandfather's camcorder, he'd make his own infomercials. "I'd sell garbage," he explains. "Because there was garbage around the house. So those were the first pieces of media I created. It wasn't good!"

Today, at 25 years old, Wang is involved in more significant pieces of media: he was one of the stars of Disney+ drama series *American Born Chinese*, and is now *the* star — in a film that also boasts Jackie Chan and Ralph Macchio — of *Karate Kid: Legends*. He's only been acting professionally for a few years, but since wrapping on the film, this suddenly, he says, feels like a viable career. He only considered it in the first place because he "wasn't really good at anything else", and so got into drama, eventually studying it at New York University.

From there he started scoring bit-parts, including, in 2021, a spot on *MacGyver*; and in 2023 came *American Born Chinese*, adapted from Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel, in which downtrodden high-school misfit Jin Wang is introduced to a world of Chinese gods and monsters. Not just because of the surname, the role fit Wang like a glove: he hadn't had the best time during his own education. "I didn't have to go into a cave for two months and find my character. I was like, 'Oh yeah, I remember being in this exact situation from when I was 14,'" he says. Alas, the show was cancelled after a solitary season, but the day he found out, he was told he had a callback for *Karate Kid: Legends*. "So that

Above and right: Ben Wang, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Brooklyn, New York, on 12 March 2025. **Far right:** Getting into the zone as Li Fong in *Karate Kid: Legends*.

BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

THE ALBUM

***OMNIBUS* BY TARKIO**

"Tarkio were from Montana, then broke up, and Colin Meloy formed The Decemberists. But I'm listening to *Omnibus*. There are loads of songs on it, it's a two-disc special. It's crazy."

THE BOOK

***MEN WITHOUT WOMEN* BY HARUKI MURAKAMI**

"This is a collection of short stories, and it's great. [Ryusuke Hamaguchi's] *Drive My Car* is based on one of them, and that's one of my favourite movies of all time."

THE PODCAST

OMNIBUS

"It's hosted by Ken Jennings and John Roderick. Ken Jennings is the current host of *Jeopardy!*, and he's also got a podcast where he talks about esoteric bullshit. And it's awesome."

was a really emotional rollercoaster of a 24-hour period."

In the film, Wang plays Beijing teenager Li Fong, who moves to New York and, with help from sensei stalwarts Daniel LaRusso (Macchio) and Mr Han (Chan), blends karate with kung fu in a bid to ace a tournament. The team put out an open casting-call, and 10,000 wannabe karate kids submitted videos, including Wang. And as more and more callbacks came his way, his confidence grew: "At a certain point I was like, 'I know I can do this.'" So did the producers.

On set, familiar faces added to the sense of security: the film boasted the same stunt team that worked on *American Born Chinese*. "These guys know how to shoot action in that Hong Kong, Chinese cinematic way. I grew up watching those movies. So I wanted to do that stuff — I wanted to wrap a wire around my waist and get yanked through a wall. And I did. It was awesome!" Other things were less comfortable, not least working alongside Jackie Chan. "Yeah, man, I was shitting my pants. But... how could you not? On a month-and-a-half of training, I go fight Jackie Chan. You're gonna shit your pants. But that's okay," he laughs.

Next up: Francis Lawrence's *The Long Walk*, adapted from Stephen King's horror novel; Wang stars opposite David Jonsson and Cooper Hoffman. "It's completely opposite to *Karate Kid* in terms of tone." How, specifically? "It's Stephen King, so there's a lot more swearing. And a lot more gore. A lot more people getting shot in the head than in *Karate Kid*," he says, with some glee.

The small screen taught him English and made him a young filmmaker. Now the big screen is his for the taking. God bless cat sick.

***KARATE KID: LEGENDS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 28 MAY**

Main: T-shirt, shirt and jeans: Levi's; Denim jacket: vintage. Inset: T-shirt and jeans: Levi's; Trainers: Ben's own. Grooming: Christy Tagatac using Kosas lipFuel Hyaluronic Lip Balm, Dior Backstage Face & Body Foundation, Chanel Les Beiges Bronzing Cream, Kevin Murphy Night Rider Hair Paste, R and Co Outerspace Hairspray. Styling: Dolly Pratt at The Wall Group. Additional imagery: Getty Images, Warner Bros.

There has been courtroom drama on screen and off for the infamous coyote. **Bottom:** Star John Cena and director David Green.

HOW WILE E. COYOTE DODGED DEATH AGAIN

WITH COYOTE VS. ACME FINALLY SET FOR RELEASE, WE CHART ITS TORTURED PATH TO THE SCREEN

1990: FURRY-OUS BEGINNINGS

The New Yorker publishes Ian Frazier's *Coyote v. Acme* — a short story presented as court transcripts from an imagined legal dispute between bungling Looney Tunes antagonist Wile E. Coyote and Acme Corporation, the company that supplies his permanently backfiring booby traps. A masterclass in deadpan humour, the piece contains such excellent lines as, "Mr Coyote is self-employed and thus not eligible for Workmen's Compensation."

2018-'22: LIGHTS, CAMERA, LEGAL ACTION

Nearly three decades later, production gets underway at Warner Bros. on *Coyote vs. Acme*, a live-action/animated hybrid film based on Frazier's story. Produced by James Gunn, directed by Dave Green and written by *May December* scribe Samy Burch, Will Forte is cast as Coyote's lawyer, Kevin Avery, who's facing off against his tough-guy former boss Buddy Crane (John Cena), now a leading attorney for Acme.

2023: A COYOTE CASUALTY

With principal photography completed in May 2022, the film is initially slated for release on 21 July 2023. But it blows right past that date, and in November, a coyote-flattening boulder drops as Warner Bros. make the shock announcement that the film is to be shelved, with the studio preferring to take a reported $30 million tax write-off than release the $70 million production.

2023-'24: A ROAD RUNNER-FUELLED RIOT

Fans and filmmakers worldwide are up in arms over the decision. Warner Bros. rejects offers from Netflix and Paramount to buy the film, and the hashtag #SaveCoyoteVsAcme begins trending on social media. The likes of Phil Lord, Chris Miller and Daniel Scheinert criticise the cancellation, with Lord calling the film "wonderful" and "moving". A "funeral screening" is held for the cast with Forte writing, "When I heard our movie was getting 'deleted'... I was thinking '[it] must be a hunk of junk'. But then I saw it. And it's incredible."

2025: A WILY WIN

Just as all hope seems lost, *Coyote vs. Acme* proves as miraculously unkillable as its title character. In March this year, distribution company Ketchup Entertainment swoops in with a $50 million offer to rescue the movie, calling it "the perfect blend of nostalgia and modern storytelling", and scheduling it for cinematic release in 2026. Has Wile E. Coyote finally got his happy ending? As far as bumps in the road go for this production, let's hope that's all, folks. **TOM ELLEN**

Triple threat

NEW CRIME COMEDY **DEEP COVER** SEES ORLANDO BLOOM, BRYCE DALLAS HOWARD AND NICK MOHAMMED IMPROVISING FOR THEIR LIVES. HERE, THE TRIO TALK FAST-THINKING AND AWKWARD ADS

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

ON-STAGE COMEDY can feel like life-or-death stuff to the people performing it; hence the terms "killing" or "destroying" being bandied around freely on the stand-up scene. But what if improv comics were dropped into a situation in which a poor ad-lib could result in their literal demise? Such is the premise of new comedy *Deep Cover*, in which improv teacher Kat (Bryce Dallas Howard), plus two of her less talented students — shy Hugh (Nick Mohammed) and preening Method actor Marlon (Orlando Bloom) — are recruited by the police to infiltrate a London gang. We dialled up the three stars on Zoom and asked, "Yes... and?"

Had the three of you crossed paths before this film?
Nick Mohammed: No, we never had. I remember there was a rumour that you were at the Edinburgh festival, Orlando, a few years ago. But

Clockwise from main: Method man Marlon (Orlando Bloom) goes full emote as a startled Hugh (Nick Mohammed) and Kat (Bryce Dallas Howard) look on; The reserved Hugh — not ideal for improv; Kat and some high-end snackery; "A horse walks into a bar..." Marlon at work.

no. Although weirdly I have worked with Henry Winkler a lot, who is adorable, and who I believe is Bryce's godfather.

Orlando Bloom: I'd met Bryce. We presented at the Golden Globes, like, ten years ago. I think it was the night that Leo's movie about the bear...

Mohammed: *The Revenant*?

Bloom: That one! We were having a little giggle backstage.

Bryce Dallas Howard: It was lovely. And that was when he saw Katy Perry for the first time. When we walked out on stage, he looked into the audience, saw her, and was like, "Oh!"

You play improv comedians of varying talent. Where do your characters rate on a skill-level scale of one to ten?

Howard: Rating ourselves? Oh my God, I'm in *Black Mirror* again! (*Laughs*)

Mohammed: I'll start: one. Hugh is the worst at it, undoubtedly. I guess he gets better across the film, but probably still is only around a five, even at his best.

Bloom: I think Marlon fancies himself as a ten, but he's probably living somewhere in the high threes, if that. (*Laughs*) His total Method commitment approach is what was really appealing to play with.

Howard: In the trio, my character is the expert. A nine or a ten — as written! She's the one who imagined being on the Amy Poehler, Kristen Wiig track. And it just did not click for her. She's definitely at a crossroads and feeling underutilised.

To pay the bills, Marlon does TV ads. And at one point he's seen on TV, climbing out of a fridge dressed as 'the Pizza Knight'. Have any of you had surreal advert experiences?

Bloom: I did a commercial in Japan that was like *Lost In Translation* a little bit. I think I was doing something for a sugar-free cola that was being promoted by Kirin beer or something. It was very fun, but all of the clichés were true at that time. Not being able to understand anything, and trying to make the most of it.

Mohammed: Right at the start of my career, I had to audition for one. This is so Pizza Knight territory, but it was literally a microwaveable beef burger... and I didn't get it. I didn't get the role. It was so humiliating.

Bloom: Sugar-free cola, microwaveable beef burger... there's a happy meal right there.

Mohammed: We just need Bryce to have done a commercial about chips and you've got a meal deal.

Howard: (*Laughs*) Sadly not. I remember I did do a voice for a birth-control commercial, where I had to rattle off symptoms very, very quickly. Just all these nightmarish side effects. I kept emphasising things, because I felt it was very important to disclose the reality, so I think I might have been replaced. And thank goodness for that.

Finally, *Deep Cover* is a movie about improv. Have you had much chance to actually improvise in a film?

Mohammed: The first film I did was *The Martian*. It was a relatively small part, but I was really, really nervous. I was doing an American accent in it, which I'd not done before, and so I decided to learn the lines phonetically, almost like another language. And then I got on set and just before they called action Ridley Scott was like, "Okay, improvise!" (*Laughs*) I just put "Holy shit" at the start of every sentence, pretty much.

Howard: I would say I had that experience doing *50/50*. I just remember the fun of, "Okay, do the scene and then just do all the stuff you're yearning to do and craving to say." Evan [Goldberg] and Seth [Rogen] and Jonathan [Levine], they'd always be behind the camera, giggling and snickering. That excitement is infectious.

Bloom: "You have my bow" — that was improvised. (*Laughs*) Not really. But I did do a movie [2015's *Digging For Fire*] that was all improvised, with Joe Swanberg. It was terrifying and liberating, all at the same time. There were moments of just pure creative chaos that felt really good. And then some of it was like, "Okay, well, we won't be using *that*."

***DEEP COVER* IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 12 JUNE**

The block-buster that rocked the multiplex

CHICKEN JOCKEYS? LAVA ANTHEMS? STEVE?! *EMPIRE* DISSECTS THE FAN-FUELLED PHENOMENON BEHIND A MINECRAFT MOVIE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

"IT WAS VERY much like that scene in *Apocalypse Now*." Isaac Mahaffey, an American filmmaker and YouTuber, is describing the energy at an opening-day screening of *A Minecraft Movie*. It was 5.30pm on Friday 4 April, and middle school had just let out when he headed down to his local AMC in Austin, Texas. Over the course of the film, the cinema descended into pandemonium: 11-to-13-year-olds were jumping on seats, popcorn flying through the air as familiar characters and lingo appeared on screen. During the end credits, smaller kids took to the aisles dancing, *Footloose*-style. It was at this point that a child turned to Mahaffey and, similar to Martin Sheen's Captain Willard in the Vietnam war epic, asked who was in charge. "I hadn't ever seen a movie theatre erupt like that before," Mahaffey concludes, baffled.

At the time of *Empire* going to press, the film has made over $720 million worldwide in 15 days, making it the highest-grossing film adaptation of a video game ever. The 34-second song 'Steve's Lava Chicken' from the film even crashed into the UK music charts, making it the shortest song to ever do so. The movie's success was partly generated by the aforementioned kid-charged carnage. It started as raucous cheers and airborne snacks during the now world-famous, meme-based "Chicken Jockey" (in which a zombie rides a chicken) and "I am Steve" (a line made internet-famous following the film's teaser trailer) scenes. "It's definitely been a chaotic one," confirms Hallie Merrett, a high-level staff member at the Everyman cinema in Egham. "You're instantly dreading cleaning that screen because you don't know what you're gonna find."

In the US, matters escalated to police interventions and even a live chicken being smuggled into a screening. On one occasion, the film's high-octane star Jack Black surprised fans in-person before a screening and asked them to keep things civil. "No throwing popcorn and absolutely *no* chicken jockey!" yelled the actor while wielding a *Minecraft* pickaxe. Some cinema chains, meanwhile, have attempted to harness the mayhem: Cineworld introduced "Chicken Jockey" 4DX screenings in which fans are encouraged to go wild. "This audience isn't just watching culture anymore. They're shaping it," Casey Cohen, Cineworld's head of marketing, wrote about the decision.

In putting their stamp on this fan-fuelled success, however, some fear that corporations are killing the vibe. "The funniest bit about

DARE TO MEME

WHICH INTERNET-FRIENDLY VIDEO GAME WILL RECREATE THE *MINECRAFT MOVIE* PHENOMENON?

FORTNITE

Perhaps the most-discussed contender is this multiplayer battle royale with seemingly endless character options. An IP mash-up which allows you to play as everyone from Homer Simpson to John Wick, it could inspire a *Ready Player One*-style adaptation.

ROBLOX

Roblox allows users to create their own games for other users to play (there are 50 million on the platform). With its boxy animated characters and emphasis on its interactive elements for kids, this could be a *LEGO Movie*-style outing for pint-sized Chicken-Jockey enthusiasts.

STARDEW VALLEY

The stakes are hardly high in this simulation game: users inherit an farm and must restore it to order. It may sound like the premise of a Ghibli animation, but throw combat-training and cave-monsters into the mix and you could have a smattering of peril at your moviemaking disposal.

Warner Bros., Marco Vittur

the film is the way that people have reacted to it. I probably wouldn't have gone to see it without all of that," says 15-year-old Max Jolin, who ventured to a Monday-morning showing with friends. "It's always cringey when companies start getting involved. That's normally when the meme dies."

So what does this mean moving forward? A sequel is imminent according to Warner Bros. boss Mike De Luca, and *Minecraft*'s vast catalogue of creations means there are countless avenues for a new story. "There's a lot of stuff that they missed out from this film that I was expecting to see," explains Jolin. "Like the Ender Dragon — there are loads of bosses you can fight in *Minecraft* and none of them were included." But will a second chapter draw in the same euphoric audience as its predecessor? "I'm worried that the studios are going to learn the wrong messages from the success of this movie, because this is lightning in a bottle; it can only really be done once," says Mahaffey, who believes that the studios in question have yet to understand how to promote films to Generations Z and Alpha. With *A Minecraft Movie* on track to make $1 billion, though, meme and TikTok-based marketing looks likely to become a key building block in their mission. The horror... the horror...

Clockwise from main: Giddy up, it's time for Chicken Jockey; He is Steve — Jack Black; What the cluck?

***A MINECRAFT MOVIE* IS IN CINEMAS NOW**

TERRARIA

Another sandbox game rewarding users' creativity, *Terraria*'s 16-bit-style graphics, mythical quality and choose-your-adventure premise is a nostalgic treasure trove, full of sentient worlds and ancient spirits. Could a new NeverEnding story with bonus memes be on the cards?

ROCKET LEAGUE

A football match? Played by vamped-up cars? This mega-popular multiplayer game packs in thrills over plot with rocket-fuelled vehicles furiously trying to score against their opposing team. George Miller, clear your schedule.

BETH WEBB

THE PLATFORM

"Come on, Tom Cruise. Hit us with a full-on '90s flashback"

DAN JOLIN ON THE STAR TAKING A BREAK FROM ACTION WITH THE NEW IÑÁRRITU MOVIE

TOM CRUISE MAKES me feel young. Or rather, watching Tom Cruise movies tricks me into feeling like I've not grown older. There he was with his mile-wide grin, fighting monsters (in *Legend*) and flying jets (in *Top Gun*) when I was just a teenager. And here he still is, more-or-less doing the same thing (exactly the same thing, in the case of *Top Gun: Maverick*) decades later, despite being in his early sixties. In fact, he's more active than ever: clinging to planes and riding motorbikes off cliffs, mostly as the seemingly invincible Ethan Hunt in the 29-year-old *Mission: Impossible* series. It's like time hasn't passed for Tom Cruise, so I feel like time hasn't passed for me, either. Until I remember what I miss about him.

Don't get me wrong. The stunt stuff is hugely impressive, and a nail-bitingly refreshing palliative to the virtualisation of action cinema. I like watching a middle-aged dude running down the outside of the Burj Khalifa as much as the next person. But action has almost completely consumed his output since *Rock Of Ages* in 2012, and there used to be more to Tom Cruise than risking life and limb for the sake of big-screen entertainment.

Once upon a century, Cruise was better celebrated for his line-deliveries than his stunt work. At the turn of the millennium, if you'd asked people for their favourite TC moments, they'd more likely have said, "You complete me," (*Jerry Maguire*) or, "I'm quietly judging you," (*Magnolia*) than the dangly heist in *Mission: Impossible*. Back then, his laser-focused commitment was aimed at good, solid, adult drama wrought by some of Hollywood's most interesting directors: Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, Paul Thomas Anderson, Stanley Kubrick. Sure, he mostly played good guys — but we also got to see his dark side, in the likes of *Interview With The Vampire*, *Magnolia* and *Collateral*.

Usually, big male stars mature into more character-driven roles as their looks weather, shedding youth for depth and diversity of choices. Cruise has done the opposite. But maybe that's about to change. News that he's heading up the latest, still-untitled film by Mexican maverick Alejandro González Iñárritu (of *Birdman* and *The Revenant* fame) is music to my ears. Not only does the film itself sound epic — apparently involving "the world's most powerful man" causing a disaster — it carries the promise that we'll finally see Cruise flexing those old 'proper acting' muscles alongside the likes of John Goodman, Jesse Plemons and Sandra Hüller. And, I hope, boldly switching gears from his evergreen action-hero antics.

Come on, Tom. Hit us with a full-on '90s/early 2000s flashback. Take us back to the days before the stunts became the brand. Make me feel young in a different way.

Crash, bang, Oscars

BRACE YOURSELF: THE LONG-ARGUED-FOR ACADEMY AWARD FOR STUNTS IS FINALLY A GO

WORDS **JAMIE GRAHAM**

IT WAS A triumphant moment for anyone who's ever thrown themselves off a flaming building or through a glass window in the name of movie-making. After decades of campaigning, the Academy Of Motion Picture Arts And Sciences announced in April that a Best Stunt Design category will be added to the Oscars. The award will crash the ceremony of the 100th Academy Awards, in 2028, which will honour films released in 2027.

"It's cool," says Chad Stahelski, who worked as martial-arts stunt co-ordinator on the original *Matrix* trilogy before burly-brawling his way to the director's chair for all four chapters of the *John Wick* saga. "It's nice to be acknowledged. It's been talked about for years now. I've been pretty involved since *John Wick 4* came out."

The campaign dates back to as early as 1991, with stunt legend Jack Gill a key figure in getting things off the ground. "The Academy told me, 'If you want to pursue this, it might take three to five years.' That was 32 years ago," he told *Empire* in 2023. What began as a movement of stunt performers grew to include stunt coordinators, who cast and choreograph stunts. Stunt co-ordinating is a newer profession, and Stahelski — who, with David Leitch, created 87eleven Action Design in 1997 to supply industry-leading equipment, facilities and training — feels that an increased awareness of stunt work has catapulted the award over the line.

"For a lot of time, the *modus operandi* was, 'Let's keep that quiet. Why do we want the audience to know it's not Cary Grant? It's part of the magic,'" Stahelski explains. "But over the last 20 years, with the internet, and the last ten years, with [behind-the-scenes footage playing a major role in a film's marketing]... Now the public is accepting and we have actors who are very proud of their stunt teams."

Fellow filmmaker and action choreographer Gareth Evans (*HAVOC*, *The Raid*) is delighted that a Best Stunt Design award is barrelling forward, but stresses there is much to finalise. "Stunt Design... is that the execution of a stunt?" he asks. "Is it the engineering? Is it the choreography design? How would you weigh up a martial-arts piece of choreography that is intricate, and flowery, and rhythmic, and percussive, versus vehicle stunts, which are intensely difficult to manage and achieve, or underwater, or in the air, or pyrotechnics?"

The 2028 start date allows time for criteria to be established, and it will take still more time to see how, or if, the award impacts the stunt community in terms of remuneration for stunt artists based on ticket sales for films. Of one thing Stahelski is confident, though: the performance of live stunts could juice up the Oscar ceremony. "[It's] the awards *show*," he says. "You have to make it entertaining for the people who are not in the industry." Get ready to buckle up.

Clockwise from main: Tom Cruise executes another Hunt stunt in *M:I8*; Things get hairy for Michelle Yeoh in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*; A high-octane handshake in *RRR*.

A24, Focus Features, Getty Images
Netflix, Paramount

THE MONTHLY MIXTAPE

EMPIRE MIXMASTER AMON WARMANN SELECTS THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL TUNES

'WHY YOU HERE/BEFORE THE SUN WENT DOWN'
LUDWIG GÖRANSSON

SINNERS

Göransson's beautiful blues guitar has a hint of eeriness before it gives way to Miles Caton's soaring vocal riffs. Press play and welcome it in.

'MORNING EVENING'
TOM BASDEN AND CAREY MULLIGAN

THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND

This heartwarming British comedy casts Basden and Mulligan as a dream indie-folk duo. Find them in their element in this harmonious, guitar-led ode to love lost.

'ICE CUBE IS GONE'
ANTONIO SÁNCHEZ

THE STUDIO

A jazzy fusion of frantic percussion and lightning-quick piano: the perfect accompaniment to the fast-paced world of Hollywood hustling explored in Seth Rogen's comedy series.

'I FEEL ALIVE'
JACK BLACK

A MINECRAFT MOVIE

The Tenacious D frontman reunites with Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl to take us back to the school of rock. Booming drums and thunderous vocals make this the best-ever song to name-check an Ender Dragon.

'FUTURE DAYS'
PEDRO PASCAL

THE LAST OF US: SEASON 2

As the world-weary Joel, Pascal performs an emotional rendition of Pearl Jam's rock ballad. Lifted from a crucial moment in the source video game, the song gives the acclaimed show a soulful reprieve from the mayhem.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE *EMPIRE* SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE

Here: Holy roller — Jesus is voiced by Oscar Isaac. **Below:** The end is nigh (or is it?).

A CHRISTIAN CROWD-PLEASER HITS BIG

HOW THE KING OF KINGS STORMED THE BOX OFFICE

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT *THE KING OF KINGS*?

While *A Minecraft Movie* dominated the Easter-holiday box office, this CG-animated Christian film took the number-two spot in the US, hauling in $19.3 million during its opening weekend — almost $5 million more than the Book of Exodus-based *The Prince Of Egypt* back in 1998, making it the biggest-ever opening for a faith-based animated movie (not adjusting for inflation).

WHAT'S IT ACTUALLY ABOUT?

The life of Jesus (Oscar Isaac), but with a twist: it's all narrated/witnessed by Charles Dickens (Kenneth Branagh), who's trying to convince his son Walter (Roman Griffin Davis) that the New Testament is a better story than the legend of King Arthur. This is because it's based on Dickens' *The Life Of Our Lord*, which he wrote for his kids (and intended never to publish).

WHO MADE IT?

Angel Studios, the indie-powerhouse which released the controversial but similarly successful Jim Caviezel-starring thriller *Sound Of Freedom* in 2023. Global Head of Theatrical Distribution & Brand Development Brandon Purdie said *The King Of Kings*' triumph proved audiences are "here for stories that amplify light".

HOW DID IT DO SO WELL?

Partly it's good timing, and partly it's as Purdie says: there's clearly a thirst for this kind of thing in the US, where an estimated 120 million people are weekly churchgoers. Plus, the starry voice cast (which also features Uma Thurman, Pierce Brosnan and Forest Whitaker) hasn't hurt. But mostly it speaks to the effectiveness of Angel Studios' crowdfunding business model, with its 50,000-plus investors, including the 2023-launched Angel Guild: a kind of VIP club that filters and endorses projects, whose members receive exclusive benefits such as complimentary movie tickets. Talk about a built-in audience.

WHAT WERE THE REVIEWS LIKE?

Middling. *The Guardian* called *The King Of Kings* "serviceable" but "syrupy" with "really ugly" character animation. However, it earned a rare A+ grade from CinemaScore, which samples opening-night audience reactions. "I love God, and Jesus," wrote one viewer on Google. "Thank you for making this movie. It was beautiful."

IS THIS A NEW TREND NOW?

Angel Studios is certainly encouraged by the response, and already has its next animated movie lined up: *Young David*, a musical about David and Goliath. When it was announced, the studio's marketing officer Alex Nielsen said, "We intend to release the most successful animated film of all time." Well, you gotta have faith. **DAN JOLIN**

***THE KING OF KINGS* IS IN CINEMAS NOW**

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Zach Galifianakis

THE *LILO & STITCH* STAR ON MILK, MOULDY BREAD AND MEETING PRINCE

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

ARNO

What's the worst job you've ever had?
I used to work at this place in New York called Webster Hall, and my job was to pick up beer bottles on the dancefloor on my hands and knees. You couldn't move around standing up because of the people dancing, so they asked me to get on my hands and knees and do it. I did it for four nights, then I thought: "I can't." I was a house cleaner in New York for a while, too. Worked for a company called Manhattan Feather Dusters. I remember once I was cleaning the house of this really fancy dude, and I had my hand in the toilet and someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was this female model, and she looked down at me and said, "Do you.. *like* your job?" (*Laughs*) I didn't like cleaning toilets, but I actually did enjoy cleaning houses. I'm a good cleaner.

When were you most starstruck?
I didn't meet him, but years ago, I was in an elevator and Prince got in. It was Prince, this big guy with him, and me. And I... couldn't believe it. I didn't want to bug him so I didn't say anything. I wasn't an actor at this point — I was a production assistant. It's funny, when you get kind of well-known and meet other [famous] people, you're usually disappointed. (*Laughs*) But with Prince... wow. I loved him so much. He was unreal.

Which movie have you seen more than any other?
Probably *The Hangover*. (*Laughs*) No — I've actually only seen that movie once. I'd say *The Shawshank Redemption*. I really do love that movie. That's when Hollywood gets it *right*. In terms of comedies, I think I also watched *This Is Spinal Tap* several times when it first came out. *Withnail And I*, too — I like to rewatch that. The scene in the phone booth [where Withnail calls his agent] is so great.

How much is a pint of milk?
I'm the grocery shopper in the family, so I should know this. I'm in Canada so I'm going to give you Canadian prices... I'll say $4.

What was your first pet?
A Golden Retriever named Zorba, as in Zorba The Greek. I just got a new dog, actually. Just drove him up from the United States to Canada. There he is! (*Zach points through the window at a lively-looking dog outside*) Do you want to meet him? His name's Marvin. Come here, boy! Actually, I'm not going to call him in here because he's *obsessed* with me. He stalks me. I have to shut myself away.

Whose poster did you have on your wall as a kid?
Indiana Jones. I don't know which film. It was a pretty generic poster, and it wasn't up long because my brother stole it.

What's the best piece of advice you've been given?
When I was young my dad told me, "Find something you're passionate about, and try to make a living out of it." I knew early on I wanted to be an entertainer, and my parents advised me to chase that. They probably thought I was a moron, but they were very supportive.

Do you have any unusual hobbies?
I make bricks. Dry them and fire them up. I'd show you some right now, but they're in my greenhouse. I do a lot of stuff for the garden. I make my own fertiliser out of old bones. I'll find a dead deer in the woods, take the bones, burn them, and then put them in a blender to make bone meal. Bone meal is really good for certain plants. I also burn seashells because they make calcium. Here, look at my fingernails... (*Zach holds up his fingers, which do indeed look as if they've recently been burning seashells*) Are these interesting hobbies? I have to say, I love these questions.

What's the worst thing you've ever eaten?
I have a memory of biting into some bread that was so mouldy it had probably already turned into penicillin. It was early in the morning, I didn't really look at it, just put it in my mouth, and it was just... pure mould. That was bad.

What do you do better than anyone else you know?
Zoom interviews. No, I'm pretty average at most things, really. I do think I'm a pretty good dad. I got the father thing quite easily. I was never worried about it. I was just so excited about it. Yeah, being a dad is one thing I do have confidence in.

***LILO & STITCH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 MAY**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

8 MAY - 4 JUNE 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Hope is where the heart is: Cassian Andor (Diego Luna).

Top to bottom: Imperial supervisor Dedra Meero (Denise Gough) works on her scowl; Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) and Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård) keep smiling; Orson Krennic (Ben Mendelsohn) is back.

TV

ANDOR: SEASON 2

ONE WAY OUT FOR THE *STAR WARS* SHOW'S FINAL SEASON

★★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **12 OF 12**

SHOWRUNNER Tony Gilroy
CAST Diego Luna, Adria Arjona, Denise Gough, Stellan Skarsgård, Genevieve O'Reilly

PLOT A year after the riot on Ferrix, Cassian Andor (Luna) is now a crucial member of the rebellion — as the Empire moves towards unleashing the Death Star.

WHEN THE FIRST season of *Andor* arrived, it blew away *Star Wars* newbies and long-time fans alike. Focusing on an unexplored character from a spin-off prequel, it surpassed all expectations, tracking the first half of Cassian Andor's (Diego Luna) radicalisation from street thief to full-blown revolutionary. This second season charts the second half, between Cassian joining the ranks of Luthen Rael's (Stellan Skarsgård) network of rebels and the events of 2016's *Rogue One* — and despite us knowing how this ends, every step along the way is urgent, compelling, excellent television.

Season 2 begins four years before the Battle of Yavin. We find Cassian stealing an Imperial test ship, before being ambushed by a gang of rudderless rebels. Bix (Adria Arjona), still traumatised from her torture in Season 1, is hiding in the outer rim with droid B2EMO and co. Imperial supervisor Dedra Meero (Denise Gough, on scene-stealing form once again) is being recruited for a new project on Ghorman by the ruthless Director Krennic (Ben Mendelsohn, returning to the role), and playing house with the power-hungry Syril (Kyle Soller). Senator Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) is preparing for her daughter's wedding, while facing mounting pressure from those around her. From there, the season is delivered in three-episode chunks, each moving forward a year in time, getting ever closer to Cassian heading to the Ring of Kafrene to start his final mission.

Andor's first season was a kind of awakening — for the character, for those around him, for the rebellion itself. The second is a clear-eyed look at what it takes to fight against the kind of oppressive, corrupt, genocidal power that the Empire yields (complete with chilling real-life parallels). It's about sacrifice, selflessness, and giving up what you love for the greater good. From Cassian himself through to the wider ensemble — Mothma, Dedra, Luthen's assistant Kleya (Elizabeth Dulau), fellow rebel Vel (Fay Marsay, who gives a spine-tingling speech in a moment of grief) — everyone is given a chance to shine, and no-one escapes paying a price for their part in this terrible, terrible war. When it comes to fighting what they hate or saving what they love, those in *Andor* often aren't given a choice.

Luna's performance communicates the burden of this on Cassian's shoulders entirely — he is a brooding but fiercely capable character, constantly battling between his desire to fight and to walk away, and his utter resistance to being controlled sees him clash with the increasingly militaristic structure of the Alliance. His bond with Bix is strengthened as they're given more time together on and off screen, making our knowledge of his eventual demise all the more heartbreaking.

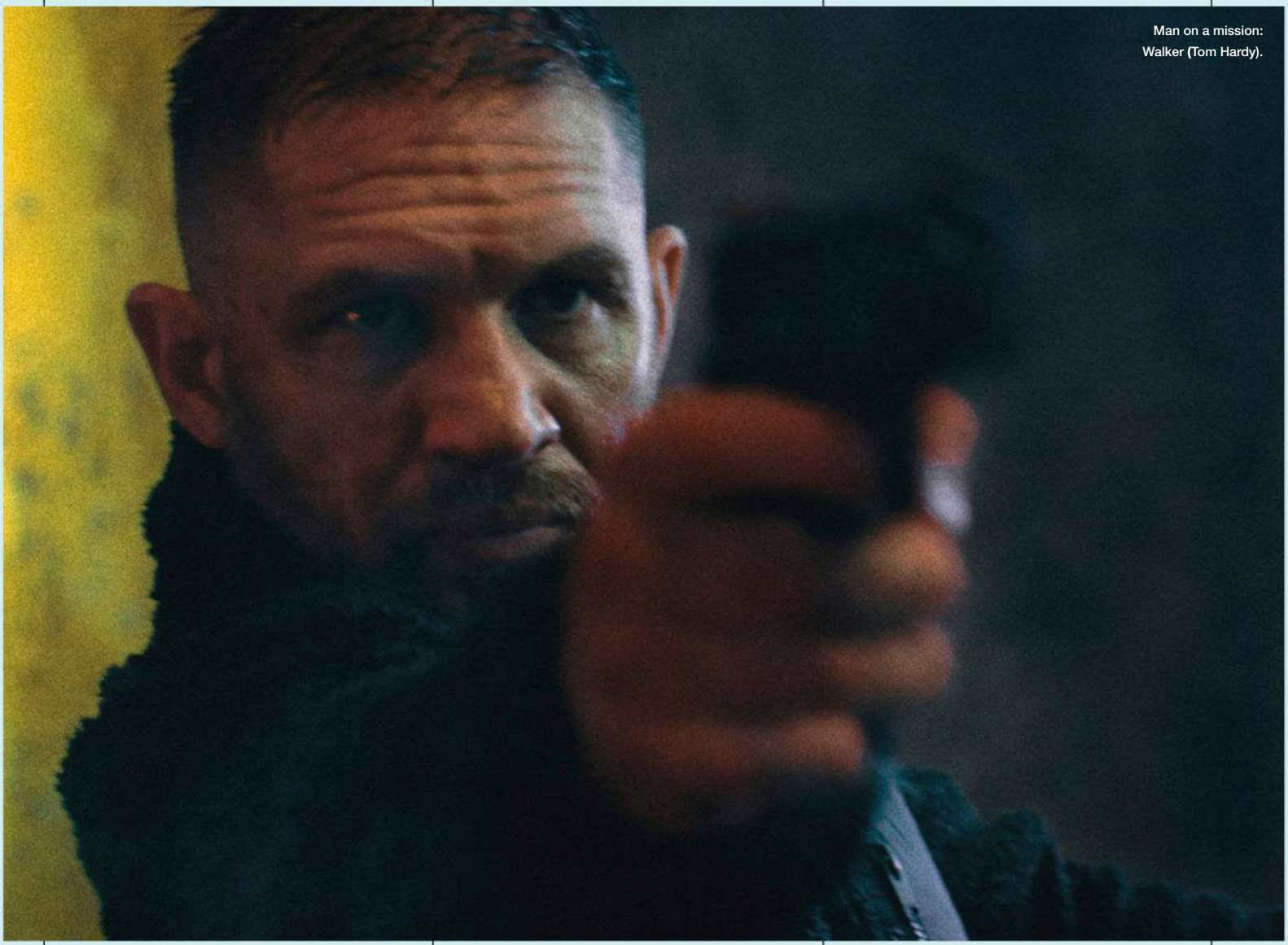
Connecting this show with *Rogue One* is an immense task for Gilroy and his writers, but one they absolutely pull off. The script weaves in *Andor* characters with existing *Star Wars* storylines, and introduces familiar faces from Gareth Edwards' film. It recontextualises deep cuts from the galaxy's lore, with two standout episodes depicting a horrifying massacre on Ghorman and Mon Mothma's extraction from Coruscant in the aftermath — both likely to induce gasps. The moments in time Gilroy chooses to focus on tie in threads that *Star Wars* scholars will be familiar with, but are also effective for those who don't know their kyber crystal from their K-2SO. Only the finale groans slightly under the weight of set-up, but the core story is so well crafted, it all still works.

In one pivotal, prophetic scene, Cassian is identified by a Force healer as a "messenger"; someone gathering things as they move through life, all for a distinct purpose. The same could be said for *Andor* itself. It isn't rewriting Cassian's story: it's filling it out, enhancing it. In watching it, we are gathering information about how the sparks of this rebellion turned into a raging flame, and deepening our connection to a man in the middle of it all. Part of what makes *Andor* so great is that you could strip away the *Star Wars*-ness, the blasters and the jargon and the droids, and it would still soar as a top-tier political thriller. But at the same time, the blood of this iconic franchise — the heart, the values, the triumph over evil — runs through its veins. It will make you fall in love with *Star Wars*, whether for the first time or the 50th. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **Beautifully made, cleverly structured and genuinely moving, *Andor* Season 2 solidifies Tony Gilroy's spin-off as one of the greats. This is *Star Wars* — and small-screen storytelling in general — at its best.**

WATCH FIRST

Showrunner Tony Gilroy has cited the films of director Alan J. Pakula as an influence on his work — especially paranoid 1970s thrillers *Klute*, *The Parallax View* and *All The President's Men*.



Man on a mission: Walker (Tom Hardy).

FILM

HAVOC

THE ACTION GENIUS BEHIND *THE RAID* IS BACK ON BONE-CRUSHING FORM

★★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **TBC** / **115 MINS**

DIRECTOR Gareth Evans
CAST Tom Hardy, Jessie Mei Li, Timothy Olyphant, Forest Whitaker, Luis Guzmán, Quelin Sepulveda

PLOT Anguished cop Walker (Hardy) must find the son of politician Beaumont (Whitaker) while atoning for his past amid the violent underbelly of his city.

THERE'S A VITALNESS to Gareth Evans' filmmaking that is yet to lose momentum. First felt in 2011's *The Raid*, when the film's compact premise allowed for dizzyingly kinetic fight sequences that all but pinned you to your seat, the writer-director has continued to mine his boundless knowledge of the heroic bloodshed genre in order to fuse frenzied violence with themes of morality.

HAVOC is an extension of his small yet combustible oeuvre. Set over the Christmas period, we find Tom Hardy's Walker in the dim aisles of a convenience store, trying to scrape together a passable last-minute present for his six-year-old daughter. The actor is a master at playing wounded, war-beaten outliers and wears the role comfortably. Through flashback, we find Walker embroiled in a shady drug operation gone awry. In the present day, he's tasked with tracking down Charlie (Justin Cornwell), whose disappearance after a botched drug deal of his own puts Walker on the wrong side of a Malaysian crime boss (Yeo Yann Yann). Then there's his cop buddy Vincent (Timothy Olyphant), adding internal chaos to the mix.

Evans' last major outing was the first season of *Gangs Of London*, a gritty, expansive exploration of inner-city rivalry that has continued for another two instalments. In *HAVOC*, the plot feels somewhat overstuffed as it strains to cover a similar scale of narrative, with warring factions and constantly shifting motivations piling into a 115-minute runtime.

It also means that the action takes a little while to arrive — but when it does, it lands like a nuclear missile. In recent years, action cinema has become dominated by slick, hyper-stylised set-pieces, with artfully framed shots capturing the mayhem. Evans takes a blowtorch to the rulebook, with frenzied, inventive, thrilling choreography that makes it seem as if his cameras are bouncing off walls and bodies.

There's also something refreshingly egoless to it; Hardy may have top billing but takes not only many sucker punches to the face but an entire roof to the head. Around him Evans utilities his full cast, throwing greener actors like Quelin Sepulveda, who plays Charlie's partner Mia, into the eye of the storm, armed with a meat cleaver and a mission to survive. The result is a throbbing, bone-crunching diorama of violence with the occasional horrifying, glorious flourish (you'll never want to see a fishing harpoon again).

Through Walker's journey, you can feel Evans' intention to imbue his film with more heart than we've seen before in his work. And it mostly lands, although a more stripped-back ensemble might have helped with his objective. When it comes to his bread-and-blood-splattered-butter, however, few contemporary filmmakers do it better. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT **Unsurprisingly, *HAVOC* is at its best when we're plunged into wall-to-wall carnage. It may not be for the faint-hearted, but this fist-flinging fever-dream sees Evans back near the top of his game.**

THE PENGUIN LESSONS

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **112 MINS**
DIRECTOR Peter Cattaneo
CAST Steve Coogan, Jonathan Pryce, Björn Gustafsson, Vivian El Jaber

Peter Cattaneo's new film offers a little more drama and nuance than you might fear from the usual whimsical, British, feel-good film territory. Steve Coogan plays Tom Michell, an English teacher who in 1976 takes up a role at a boarding school in Argentina, where a military coup — and the accidental adoption of a penguin — upend his life. So it's *Dead Poets Society* meets *I'm Still Here* meets… *Happy Feet*? There is some heft to what might otherwise have been weightless frippery, even if it also necessitates some wild tonal swerves. Still, the film is thankfully sharper and less cute than it initially appears. If you do pick up a penguin, you could do worse than experience Michell's kind of spiritual and moral awakening. **HOH**

YOUR FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS

★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **7 OF 9**
SHOWRUNNER Jonathan Tropper
CAST Jon Hamm, Olivia Munn, Amanda Peet, Mark Tallman

Following a recent divorce, hedge-fund manager Andrew 'Coop' Cooper (Jon Hamm) is fired; to keep his family living in the manner they've grown accustomed to, Coop resorts to stealing from his rich neighbours. In Hamm's first starring TV role since *Mad Men*, the actor remains rugged and charming, and watching him rip off rich guys while barely masking his own pain is a delight. The series starts slow, but when Coop does finally start stealing from the rich — a selfish Robin Hood of sorts — momentum builds, and so does the tension. Hamm is having the time of his life here in a somewhat thrilling, occasionally dull dark comedy that's still worth recommending to friends and neighbours alike. **DO**

Here: They had a lot at stake. **Below:** Red eyes at night, vampire's delight.

FILM

SINNERS

LET HE WHO IS WITHOUT RYAN COOGLER CAST THE FIRST STONE

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **138 MINS**

DIRECTOR Ryan Coogler
CAST Michael B. Jordan, Delroy Lindo, Miles Caton, Hailee Steinfeld, Wunmi Mosaku, Jack O'Connell

PLOT Twin brothers Smoke and Stack (Jordan) return to the Jim Crow South to open a juke joint — but vampires crash their opening night.

WE'VE SEEN VAMPIRES as a metaphor for sin, sex and even Mormonism. Now Ryan Coogler bring us vampires as colonialists, forever lustful for the divine spark in others. The result is very close to a Deep South vampire musical, and if that sounds weird, you ain't seen nothing yet.

Michael B. Jordan plays twin brothers Smoke and Stack, who have returned after years of soldiering and running with gangsters to run a juke joint. They swagger around, stirring up excitement for their grand opening, but in quiet moments betray the watchful intensity of men who have killed before and who will again if needs be. Their cousin 'Preacher Boy' Sammie (newcomer Miles Caton), barely out of his teens but already an astonishingly gifted bluesman, joins them. With Smoke's ex Annie (Wunmi Mosaku), a cook and voodoo priestess helpfully well-versed in supernatural lore; Stack's ex Mary (Hailee Steinfeld), still mourning their break-up; and musician Delta Slim (Delroy Lindo), everything is in place.

Then the vampires, led by Jack O'Connell's approximately Irish Remmick, arrive, and it all goes straight to hell. Aside from dancing a jig — surely a vampire first — Remmick is not particularly compelling, perhaps because attempts to humanise him as another victim of colonialism and forced religion don't really work when he's now attempting the same appropriation.

Aside from a brief flash-forward opening, Coogler takes his time to get to the blood-letting, with a sun-drenched first hour paced like a prestige HBO drama. The world-building is Coogler's point: the long shadow of slavery; the inequalities of a South where people still talk about living on plantations and where they're still paid in plantation scrip instead of real money. Chain gangs work alongside the road; most people are up at dawn to pick cotton; the man who sells the twins their venue is a rumoured Klansman.

Music, however, offers an escape from all this. It's a refuge, and a connection to past and future, as Coogler demonstrates in a weird and wonderful moment near the halfway point. But as with anything in this unequal society, those who are musically or metaphysically gifted risk being cut down to size by monstrous predation. Coogler uses extraordinary tools to communicate this: as well as Ludwig Göransson's blues-drenched score, he sometimes plays the soundtrack of (often traumatic) stories that characters are narrating, without showing any flashbacks or matching images. The mismatch is jarring, but effective.

It's a lot to chew on — literally, in the end — and some characters feel underserved by the time we reach the final rush of blood, teeth and fire. Then again, such a wildly original, defiantly weird and gorgeously made film can hardly be expected to follow a rulebook. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **An idiosyncratic, thematically dense twist on the vampire myth that's oddly paced but beautifully played. One to sink your teeth into.**

Abby (Kaitlyn Dever) living life on the edge.

TV

THE LAST OF US: SEASON 2

THE VIDEO-GAME ADAPTATION MOVES UP TO HARD MODE

★★★★★

OUT **NOW (SKY/NOW)** / EPISODES VIEWED **7 OF 7**

SHOWRUNNERS Craig Mazin, Neil Druckmann
CAST Pedro Pascal, Bella Ramsey, Isabela Merced, Kaitlyn Dever, Gabriel Luna, Rutina Wesley

PLOT In post-apocalyptic America, Joel (Pascal) and Ellie (Ramsey) are now living quietly. But the arrival of Abby (Dever) threatens their peace.

IF THERE WAS ever even a 'video-game curse' — the claim that games could never be successfully adapted into film and television — then *The Last Of Us* definitively disproved it. The 2023 television series was a masterclass in adaptation, faithfully matching (and in some case besting) the groundbreaking 2013 game; in (re)telling the story of the global fungus-based pandemic — released in the midst of an actual pandemic — showrunners Craig Mazin and original game writer Neil Druckmann forged something gorgeous, thrilling and profound.

Now they are back, tempting fate and potential curses by going again. This new series, partly adapting the 2020 game sequel, only goes about halfway through *The Last Of Us Part II*'s lengthy, knotty narrative — Mazin has likened it to an *Empire Strikes Back*-style middle chapter — but against considerable odds they have pulled it off. For fans of just the TV show, the game, or both, this is another remarkable run of episodes, with as high a quality of craft and care as you could ever hope for.

There is a confident, mindful pace set here from the start. Episode 1 does the work of re-establishing this world: it has been five years since survivors Joel (Pedro Pascal) and Ellie (Bella Ramsey) traversed a devastated United States, from Boston to Salt Lake City, hoping to deliver the seemingly immune Ellie to the mysterious Fireflies. In the aftermath of that brutal failure, the pair are now safely ensconced in the thriving town of Jackson, Wyoming, and some semblance of normality has been established.

They are even seeking healing and self-actualisation, a luxurious concept in a dystopian economy: Joel is now having regular therapy from whiskey-chugging shrink Gail (Catherine O'Hara, always great value), a character not found in the game. But Joel's relationship with Ellie has deteriorated, their ill-defined surrogate father-daughter bond weakened in the face of Ellie's teenage moodiness and her lingering suspicion of some unspoken betrayal.

As with the game and the initial run of episodes, the writing here — from Mazin, Druckman and the game sequel's co-writer Halley Gross — is hugely impressive. It's deep and full of intention, each story-beat having real consideration for characters and their dynamics. It feels so authentic, bolstered by stunningly human performances from Pascal, Ramsey and a great ensemble of supporting players (Gabriel Luna as Joel's brother Tommy and Rutina Wesley as Tommy's wife Maria create particularly poignant stakes).

All that establishing work pays off in Episode 2. To say things kick off might be understating it a little. In terms of scale and ambition, staging and fluency, this episode is

KEEP 'EM PEELED

The TV adaptation brings across the Seraphites from the game: a cult-like group who communicate using a sophisticated whistle language — created especially for the game by professional whistlers.

Above, top to bottom: Ellie (Bella Ramsey) taking a breather from the fungal threat; Joel (Pedro Pascal) on the look-out.

comparable to some of the hall-of-fame episodes from *Game Of Thrones*: the kind of exceptional grand-scale cinematic television few other than HBO can muster. Yet for all the armies of fungal-faced zombies — and the occasional nods to game mechanics (Ellie throws a bottle in Episode 1, a classic stealth-mission distraction technique) — the lens here remains achingly, painfully human. Joel and Ellie face a reckoning with the arrival of Abby (Kaitlyn Dever), and much of this series mulls on the difference between revenge and justice, on the corrosive and pervasive cycle of violence. How do you find sense in all the senselessness?

It would be so easy for a show like this to feel unremittingly bleak, to embrace a kind of televisual nihilism. Be in no doubt, there will be tears (and more are bound to come in Season 3). But the magic trick the showrunners have performed here is in finding a delicate balance of tones, in finding warmth that melts the literal and figurative ice. The storytelling here is thoughtful and elliptical. One episode serves as a flashback, catching us up on intervening years between seasons, perfectly recreating the game's most profound moments. It is astonishing, the sense of innocence and wonder that Ellie briefly enjoys in this episode, a bittersweet pill of the safety she has finally found, and the tragedy we know is yet to come.

All this is compounded by an entirely believable, staggeringly well-crafted immersive universe. The cinematography leans heavily into the game's inherent cinematic qualities; the soul-tingling music from Gustavo Santaolalla summons an eerie elegance; the production design finds corresponding beauty and horror in nature, in its creeping ivy and fungal splendour. The world in *The Last Of Us* is full — of cruelty and community, hope and hopelessness, life and death. It's all there. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Moving and devastating in equal doses, *The Last Of Us* remains post-apocalyptic television at its peak. At almost every turn, it delivers. Pray to the video-game-adaptation gods that Season 3 sticks the landing.**

Here: *Drop* it! **Below:** Meghann Fahy drives the action.

FILM

DROP

PHONE BOOTH FOR THE SMARTPHONE ERA

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **95 MINS**

DIRECTOR Christopher Landon
CAST Meghann Fahy, Brandon Sklenar, Violett Beane, Jacob Robinson, Reed Diamond

PLOT A first date for widowed mother Violet (Fahy) is derailed by sinister messages from a stranger threatening to kill her family.

GREAT IDEAS CAN strike in the strangest of circumstances. In the case of *Drop*, it came when Olivia Sui, girlfriend of the film's executive producer Sam Lerner, received mysterious Shrek memes (of all things) through AirDrop, Apple's close-proximity file-sharing feature. Swap ogre memes for murder threats and you have director Christopher Landon's ridiculously fun tech thriller, which stretches its premise to absurd heights befitting of its inspiration.

It starts out innocently enough. Violet (Meghann Fahy) has been out of the dating game for so long that her wardrobe has gone full mum-core. But with the promise of getting Violet's five-year-old son into bed by 8pm, her sister pushes her to venture out for a first date with photographer Henry (a charming Brandon Sklenar). Over dinner at a fancy high-rise eatery, they flirt despite the nerves — until Violet's phone buzzes with messages that escalate from weird to deadly.

The boundaries are clear-cut: these message drops can only be received within a 50-foot radius, which happens to neatly fit within the walls of the restaurant. And so the field is set for a stealth whodunnit (or who-is-doing-it, if you will): could the culprit be the loner with his eyes glued to his phone? Or the rookie waiter who's a bit too eager for a chat? Landon — a proven master of high-concept genre fare with the likes

of *Happy Death Day* and *Freaky* — elevates what could have been a schlocky mystery, deploying theatrical lighting and colour to hone in on potential suspects, fully flexing his camera muscles in the film's final confrontation.

The predictable end result isn't quite as gripping as the journey there. At a time where our most private information is vulnerable to a phone-snatch or a single erroneous click of a link, *Drop* takes full advantage of our trusted tech's most terrifying capabilities. No matter what Violet tries, or who she seeks help from, she's caught by the cameras surrounding her and the device in her hand. The once-comforting luxury of the upscale restaurant becomes a gilded surveillance state. And the handy phone proves to be the ideal crux for a 21st-century paranoid thriller. Even when *Drop* teeters on the edge of ridiculousness, it's all rooted in very real fears.

Fahy may be familiar to most from her ability to destroy with a single look in the Sicily-set Season 2 of *The White Lotus*, and while *Drop* isn't nearly as subtle as that show, her groundedness is the antidote to the film's silliness. In a survival tactic acquired from her traumatic past, Violet swallows her fear with a polite smile, multi-tasking a promising first date with a covert hunt for an invisible killer. Landon and writers Jillian Jacobs and Chris Roach explore every wild extreme of the film's digital hell, but it's Fahy that finds the humanity of it all. **IANA MURRAY**

VERDICT **Bolstered by a grounded performance from Meghann Fahy, *Drop* deftly weaponises its titular tech to update the paranoid thriller. Better check those security settings.**

Cristin Milioti in season sequel 'USS Callister: Into Infinity'. **Below:** A hirsute Peter Capaldi in 'Plaything'.

TV

BLACK MIRROR: SEASON 7

QUITE LITERALLY "LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF *BLACK MIRROR*"

★★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / EPISODES VIEWED **6 OF 6**

SHOWRUNNER Charlie Brooker
CAST Rashida Jones, Issa Rae, Emma Corrin, Paul Giamatti, Cristin Milioti, Peter Capaldi

PLOT Six more tales of near-future tech dystopia. An actor is transported into a classic movie; a woman is gaslit by a former classmate; and a loner fosters cute digital creatures.

CHARLIE BROOKER ONCE worried that *Black Mirror*, his long-running, darkly dystopian tech-noir anthology series, would end up being "the show about consciousness being uploaded into a little disc". Now back with a seventh season, he has perhaps made peace with that description. There is plenty of familiar-but-different ground covered here, suggesting a new sense of confidence — a comfort in its own identity.

That can be seen in the show's first sequel episode, 'USS Callister: Into Infinity', a hugely enjoyable feature-length follow-up to the 2017 *Star Trek* riff 'USS Callister', mixing ethical quandaries with the flex of blockbuster production values. It's a sci-fi smash. There's also a nicely pitched adjacent episode to the choose-your-own adventure film 'Bandersnatch': the psychedelic 'Plaything' features the (very brief) return of the brilliantly nasal Will Poulter. In it, Peter Capaldi and Lewis Gribben share the role of an anxious games journalist (a nod to Brooker's earlier career) who communicates, *Close Encounters*-style, with an army of digital biological organisms called Thronglets, in a story which ends far more ambitiously and surprisingly than that sounds.

That's the special sauce at the heart of *Black Mirror*: even when working within the lines of its own formula, it can still be wildly unpredictable. Unsettling gaslighting episode 'Bête Noire' seems to operate in the usual *Twilight Zone/Tales Of The Unexpected* Venn diagram, before ending on such an extraordinary yes-they-actually-went-there ending, you can only applaud, jaw agape. 'Eulogy', meanwhile, is surprising only in how shatteringly moving it is: an *Eternal Sunshine*-esque exploration of memory and lost love with Paul Giamatti as a twinkly, genially grumpy presence. One of the best actors ever to join the *Black Mirror* roster, Giamatti is a perfect vessel for Brooker's irascible but ultimately earnest outlook. It's an awards-worthy performance.

There's pathos and emotional power aplenty here, in fact: *Truman Show*-ish 'Hotel Reverie' finds unexpected romance between movie stars modern (Issa Rae) and long dead (Emma Corrin), in a story clearly aiming to be this season's 'San Junipero' (though never quite scaling that 2016 episode's magical, spine-tingling heights) — and as long as you are on board with a slightly wobbly premise, it's beautiful. There's room for trenchant satire as well: the ruthlessly bleak healthcare drama 'Common People' is scathing and sorrowful. *Black Mirror* remains the same force it's always been: satirical, strange, and very, very sad indeed. Long may it continue. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Over a decade since he forced a prime minister to do terrible things with a pig, Charlie Brooker is still pulling the rug from under our feet in thrillingly ambitious ways. This is another eye-popping, brain-melting run of episodes.**

FILM

A MINECRAFT MOVIE

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **101 MINS**
DIRECTOR Jared Hess
CAST Jack Black, Jason Momoa, Jennifer Coolidge, Jemaine Clement

Thanks to *The LEGO Movie* and *Barbie*, the bar for kiddie-brand-exploiting cinema has risen unexpectedly high. *A Minecraft Movie* deals with that by not even bothering to try. This isn't to say it's lacking in energy. It is loud in all senses — from the hideous hot pink of Jason Momoa's tasselled leather jacket to the over-emphatic, pantomimey delivery of every single Jack Black line — and rammed with garish, square-ish action. But in terms of story and character, it really can't be arsed. Its protagonists are weary archetypes: the bro-dude moron (Momoa), the nerdy-but-creative kid (Sebastian Hansen), Jack Black (er, Jack Black)... It may have stormed the box office, but this blockbuster is more bust than block. **DJ**

FILM

THE AMATEUR

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **123 MINS**
DIRECTOR James Hawes
CAST Rami Malek, Rachel Brosnahan, Laurence Fishburne, Julianne Nicholson

This fine but forgettable espionage-thriller sees Rami Malek's introverted CIA techie Charlie Heller defy his superiors and go on a one-man mission to hunt for his wife's killers. Heller's only particular set of skills are his intelligence and resourcefulness, a gambit that Ken Nolan and Gary Spinelli's script and director James Hawes get a lot of mileage from as he goes after his targets with carefully planned traps rather than bullets. But the slow-burn storytelling never quite hits that extra gear, and the stacked supporting cast is underutilised. Still, while he can be overly stiff and one-note, Malek is at least convincing as an unlikely, easy-to-root-for hero stepping out of his comfort zone. **AW**

Clockwise from main: Folk fan Charles (Tim Key); If music be the food of love...; Meeting cute.

FILM

THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND

PLAY THAT FOLK-Y MUSIC, WHITE BOY

★★★★

OUT **30 MAY** / CERT **12A** / **100 MINS**

DIRECTOR James Griffiths
CAST Tom Basden, Tim Key, Carey Mulligan, Sian Clifford

PLOT Wealthy loner Charles Heath (Key) hires disbanded folk duo McGwyer (Basden) and Mortimer (Mulligan) for a gig. The catch? Only one of the singers knows it's a reunion.

THE BALLAD OF Wallis Island begins with big-in-the-aughts folk singer Herb McGwyer (Tom Basden) travelling by boat to a (fictional) Welsh island to play a private gig. Embellishing this premise from his 2007 BAFTA-nominated short, James Griffiths' small-scale treat, written by stars Basden (*Plebs*, *After Life*) and Tim Key (Alan Partridge's lackey Sidekick Simon), finds a sweet spot between heart and humour that sensitively explores love, loss and the difficulty in reconciling with the past, without ever skimping on great gags.

Herb is greeted on shore by Charles Heath (Key), a lonely, over-bearing but good-natured hardcore fan. Living an isolated life, Charles uses constant chatter and wordplay (after Herb falls in the sea, Charles dubs him 'Dame Judi Drenched') to overcompensate for (a deftly etched) melancholy. In Key's hands, Charles is a terrific comedy creation, be it announcing dessert ("Let's get ready to crumble!") or creating Herb's rider (a 'Winona', in Charles' parlance) based on old interviews: pickled onion Monster Munch, Braeburn apples and Johnnie Walker Blue Label. Slowly, the unusual nature of the gig emerges. Firstly, the concert is for only Charles (how he can afford Herb's £500,000 fee is a stroke of genius screenwriting absurdism). Secondly, Herb will be joined by his former folk partner and ex-lover Nell Mortimer (a winning Carey Mulligan, by turns sharp and sweet), whom he hasn't seen in nine years. Can the pair put the past aside and get the band back together for just one night?

KILLER QUOTE

"I'm in *Misery*. I'm going to wake up with no ankles."
HERB MCGWYER (TOM BASDEN)

This isn't flawless storytelling — there's a convenient contrivance at its centre, while Sian Clifford's potential love interest for Charles feels under-served — but Basden and Key's writing never takes the obvious path, throwing in plot-twists and surprising revelations amid strong character work. *Ballad* shares DNA with *Local Hero*, celebrating the magical properties of a stunning landscape, but really it's about the transformative power of both music and people. After an initial reluctance, McGwyer and Mortimer start singing together and it's a delight to watch. Basden has composed a clutch of poignant songs ("I couldn't say 'Hi'/because I was coconut shy"), his harmonies with Mulligan are beautiful, and there is something undeniably moving in watching Charles well up listening to his heroes reunited.

Herb's shifting perception of Charles and growing reconnection with Nell are perfectly pitched and played. As writers and performers, Basden and Key handle their bruised people with compassion and generosity. As such, *The Ballad Of Wallis Island* is warm, perceptive and quietly life-affirming. For, if this jaded muso and sad-sack fanboy can evolve and grow, there's hope for everyone. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT ***The Ballad Of Wallis Island*** **is a big-hearted, consoling hug of a movie. It might not reinvent the wheel, but it's the low-(Tim)-key crowd-pleaser of the year so far.**

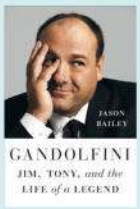
BOOKS

GANDOLFINI

ALL THIS FOR A SLICE OF GABAGOOL

★★★★

AUTHOR **JASON BAILEY**



JAMES GANDOLFINI WAS a "searcher", says *The Sopranos* creator David Chase in this new biography of the late actor who helped change TV forever. "Whatever the opposite of bullshit is, that's what Jim was searching for." That assessment reverberates through author Jason Bailey's portrait of a star forever hunting something real, on screen and off. The most heart-warming moments in this chronicle of the life and times of the man behind Tony Soprano come from tales of that realness — the time, for example, when he phoned his *Sopranos* co-star Vincent Curatola (who played rival Mob boss Johnny Sack) on Christmas morning to wish him season's greetings, years after the HBO smash ended. Curatola's wife, it turned out, was in hospital. Gandolfini tore up his Christmas plans and immediately drove there with coffee and doughnuts, because it was the decent thing to do.

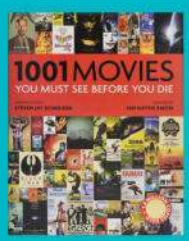
This biography — comprised of many new interviews with friends and collaborators — is full of similar stories of that decency, at odds with the selfish nature of the violent *capo* he portrayed. But there were dark depths to the star too, and *Gandolfini: Jim, Tony, And The Life Of A Legend* is at its most revealing (not to mention heartbreaking) when recounting the difficult episodes in his life after *The Sopranos* became a cultural phenomenon. The series' success hoisted upon him a stardom he wasn't prepared for, and one that even Meryl Streep couldn't comprehend (in one chapter, Streep gets a ride home with Gandolfini and is shocked by the attention from his adoring fans). It sent him, the book suggests, into a spiral.

James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano: keeping it real.

Bailey alleges that, during *The Sopranos*' third and fourth seasons, Gandolfini — struggling with the darkness of his character — was a frequent no-show on set, as drinking and partying took over his life. Edie Falco, Tony's on-screen wife Carmela, had been diagnosed with breast cancer midway through the third season, and is described as having been "infuriated" when she'd turn up to set after chemotherapy sessions, only to discover that her co-star was AWOL. There's also one concerning description of how, during the filming of a scene that called for a physical altercation between Tony and Carmela, some on set were concerned that his drinking might put Falco at risk of getting hurt for real. "I was nervous. That's true," Falco admits.

All of which makes it such a relief when the book's final chapters delve into the lightness that the actor discovered in his later years, before his tragic death in a Rome hotel room, aged 51. Throughout it all, Bailey writes with a hunger to uncover the true essence of James Gandolfini, that never spills into salaciousness. **AL HORNER**

VERDICT **A biography that goes in search of a searcher who's difficult to find; the star famously gave few interviews across his career. It might be the closest to the real Gandolfini that *Sopranos* fans will ever get.**

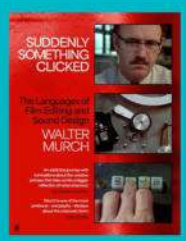


1001 MOVIES YOU MUST SEE BEFORE YOU DIE

★★★

EDITOR **STEVEN JAY SCHNEIDER**

This vast doorstop of a greatest-movies-ever list makes its perennial return with the latest updated edition. Its greatest asset is its sheer scope, highlighting older gems like 1919's *Broken Blossoms* and 1937's *The Life Of Emile Zola*. Newer additions feel less necessary: *The Theory Of Everything*? A good Christmas present for young film fans, but keep your current edition, if you have one. **JN**



SUDDENLY SOMETHING CLICKED

★★★★

AUTHOR **WALTER MURCH**

Nearly four decades after writing his first volume, legendary editor and sound designer Walter Murch is back with a beautifully written book, years in the making. An eclectic blend of memoir, film-school textbook, cinematic encyclopaedia and Murch-ian musings, it's a rich stew: sometimes rather dry and technical, but always philosophical and wise. Required reading for filmmakers and film fans alike. **JN**

A MINECRAFT MOVIE: FROM BLOCK TO BIG SCREEN

★★

AUTHOR **ANDREW FARAGO**

This behind-the-scenes account of the block-busting hit is a strictly for-fans-only affair, offering a fairly dry corporate-approved blow-by-blow account of how the world's bestselling video game became a movie. Entirely inadvertently, it's a fascinating insight into the studio and games-company supervision that goes into such a giant, lucrative franchise. **JN**

Clockwise from here: The Thunderbolts feel ropey; Bucky Barnes goes full biker; Bob finds an invisible wall.

FILM

THUNDERBOLTS*

THERE WAS AN IDEA, TO BRING TOGETHER (ANOTHER) GROUP...

★★★

OUT **NOW / 12A / 127 MINS**

DIRECTOR Jake Schreier
CAST Florence Pugh, Sebastian Stan, Wyatt Russell, Lewis Pullman, David Harbour, Hannah John-Kamen, Julia Louis-Dreyfus

PLOT After being hired by Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Louis-Dreyfus), a group of mercenaries find themselves teaming up.

IF THE AVENGERS are Marvel's A-team, the Thunderbolts feel a little like the B-team. In the comics, they were a team of anti-heroes who filled the gap when the Avengers were all killed; in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, they're a ragtag band of Suicide Squad-esque mercs, cobbled together in a series of post-credit stings by the mysterious Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus, going full Evil Veep), who is stepping into a (super)power vacuum with dark designs.

Except this superhero team-up is sort of self-assembled, IKEA-style, as befits their scrappy misfit status: solo players forced to work together, to take on threats both human and superhuman. Among them are "dime-store Captain America" John Walker/U.S. Agent (Wyatt Russell); the phase-shifting Ava Starr/Ghost (Hannah John-Kamen), last seen in 2018's *Ant-Man And The Wasp*; and Alexei Shostakov/Red Guardian (David Harbour), now a down-on-his-luck limo driver largely here to provide comic relief.

Nominally leading the fray are Bucky Barnes (13-year MCU vet Sebastian Stan), balancing political service with T-800-style one-handed shotgun reloads; and Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh), an über-adept assassin who's a little lost in life. Pugh has one of the great cinema faces, and her subtle expressions, hinting at deeper wells, were made for IMAX. She deftly flits between house-style glibness ("None of us can fly; we all just punch and shoot") and unaddressed trauma.

And then there's Bob (Lewis Pullman), whose true nature is too complex and wild to go into here. But director Jake Schreier — best known for the sweet comic drama *Robot & Frank* — does well to find human moments among the standard-issue peril, allowing the team to swap stories about gun calibers and super-serum brands.

Like the *Guardians Of The Galaxy* series, this is about a gang of losers forming a found family, though unlike *Guardians*, the eccentric humour and colourful personalities don't always land.

It's also missing a bit of colour — literally, in the washed-out palette and CG shadow-threat that dominates the latter half of the film — and figuratively, in its subject matter. From the monochrome studio logo onwards, subjects alluded to here include suicide, manic depression, domestic violence, and slavery. (And you thought DC was dark.) The mental-health stuff is not always sensitively handled — it seemingly villainises mental instability — but there is an admirable effort to give the film a backbone, and it finds an unusually internal, affecting resolution.

As for that asterisk — the most confounding bit of film title punctuation since *V/H/S/2* — well, yes, it is explained. The Marvel faithful will be gratified. There is room for this B-team yet. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **It doesn't always land, but it dares to be different, from the title to the team-up. Fresh and thoughtful in a way recent Marvel efforts haven't always managed.**

GAMES

ATOMFALL

IT'S APOCALYPTICALLY GRIM OOP NORTH

★★★

PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX SERIES S|X

He'd kill for some Kendal Mint Cake.

FROM SATIRICAL CO-OP shooter *Strange Brigade* to the multiple adaptations under its *2000 AD* publishing arm, Rebellion has made something of a name for itself in bringing British cultural consciousness to the forefront of mainstream gaming. But nowhere is this more evident than in *Atomfall*, which opens with a red telephone box nestled against the breathtaking Cumbrian countryside.

This rendition of the Lake District isn't one that any sunburnt holiday-goer would recognise, however, but an alt-history remix where the real-life Windscale reactor fire of 1957 — the worst nuclear accident in British history — has escalated into a full-blown cataclysm, ravaging the surrounding landscape with military occupations, bandit camps, and a sci-fi compendium's worth of otherworldly hazards.

Your role, as a nameless amnesiac who wakes up in one of the quarantine zone's many nuclear bunkers, is to find out what really happened in this disarmingly picturesque hellscape, and discover how your character connects to it all, in a mystery that sends you trotting across *Atomfall*'s breezy and beautiful open world.

That central conceit explicitly pulls from multiple sources, from *Doctor Who* to *The Wicker Man*, but *Atomfall* eventually finds enough of a distinctive voice to offer its own compelling slice of Campbellian sci-fi, one which just about satisfies the questions you've been seeking answers to by the time the credits roll. There's something to be said about exploring a game set in a very particular British setting, too, which is harnessed masterfully by Rebellion to sustain *Atomfall*'s peppy, Pythonesque tone.

A minimalist user interface offers loose guidance on where to go, but players are otherwise left to themselves to find and deduce clues in order to figure out what to do next. This comparative sparsity marks a refreshing counterpoint to the open-world clutter of *Atomfall*'s peers, gently encouraging you to apply active logic to your direction of travel, and absorb yourself more thoroughly into the tale.

Alas, things become noticeably less impressive whenever combat kicks into gear, which is disappointingly rote at best. Blending perfunctory first-person shooting with simple stealth mechanics, awkward melee combat, and consumable items such as bandages or nail bombs, the prosaic rhythms of the game's combat makes for one of its weakest features.

Still, that combat doesn't need to do a lot of legwork to keep you invested in sticking with *Atomfall* throughout its 15-hour runtime. Instead, the game coasts on the strengths of its presentation, storytelling, and expansive open-world fun. And, just like its real-life setting, any ocassionally uneven ground only adds to the charm. **ALEX AVARD**

VERDICT **A much stronger open-world exploration game than it is a first-person shooter, *Atomfall* is a refreshingly original blend of *Fallout* and *Fawlty Towers*.**

SOUTH OF MIDNIGHT

★★★

PC, XBOX SERIES X|S

When Hazel's mother is lost, the youngster's quest to rescue her unlocks ancestral powers to reweave reality itself. Stop-motion-style animation and a mix of Southern Gothic and mythological influences makes *South Of Midnight* visually sumptuous, but it's diminished by clunky combat. While it feels a decade out of date, strong characters and fantastic music give this undeniable Southern charm. **MK**

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

★★★★

PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

Set in late-1500s Japan, *Shadows* splits focus between stealthy ninja Naoe and warrior Yasuke, based on the real-life Black samurai. Despite distinct abilities, Yasuke feels under-utilised, but whoever you play as, you'll get to explore one of the series' most spectacular open worlds to date. Vast in scope but never as bloated as predecessor *Valhalla*, Shadows is a return to form for *Assassin's Creed*. **MK**

BLUE PRINCE

★★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

Simon has inherited a 45-room mansion, but in a *Brewster's Millions* twist, only gets to keep it if he finds a hidden 46th room. A layout resetting daily and limited number of steps you can take to explore proves a strategic challenge, while randomly placed rooms offer their own puzzles or hints to the grander mystery. Often maddening yet endlessly captivating, *Blue Prince* is a first-person puzzler of surprising depth. **MK**

The pasty-and-cream-tea brigade had arrived.

FILM

THE SALT PATH

GILLIAN ANDERSON AND JASON ISAACS WALK HARD

★★

OUT **30 MAY** / CERT **12A** / **115 MINS**

DIRECTOR Marianne Elliott
CAST Gillian Anderson, Jason Isaacs, James Lance

PLOT Recently made homeless, Ray (Anderson) and Moth (Isaacs) embark on a 600-mile walk around the Cornish coastline.

HOT ON THE heels of last year's *The Outrun* (or, rather, trudging along behind it with blistered feet) comes *The Salt Path*, another adaptation of a memoir (by Raynor Winn, published in 2018) about the healing power of nature, featuring craggy coastlines and encounters with seals. Two examples don't make a trend, but could it be that studios have identified 'bestselling nature-writing-slash-memoir' as a new kind of exportable British intellectual property? While on paper this true story of a middle-aged couple facing homelessness and a debilitating disease embarking on a trek along the southwest coast of England should be compelling, in actuality the road is a bit tough going.

We begin *in medias res* with hippyish Ray (Gillian Anderson) and Moth (Jason Isaacs) fighting the elements to rescue their tent from being washed away by the tide. We're then taken back to the beginning of their journey, and both seem weary before they've even started. Interwoven flashbacks reveal that not only have they lost their home due to a dodgy investment, Moth has been diagnosed with a rare terminal illness that severely impacts his movement. They walk because they have nowhere else to go and just £40 a week to live on.

As they make their difficult journey along the clifftops, Moth often limping in pain, they inevitably encounter varying degrees of human decency, from free pasties to being prodded by a posho with a walking stick. Screenwriter Rebecca Lenkiewicz (*Disobedience*, *She Said*) is able to avoid some if not all of the clichés of the long-walk-to-self-discovery subgenre and includes some light commentary *à la Bait* on Cornwall's split identity as both a holiday destination for the rich and one of the poorest regions of the UK. But the story here is too unfocused to land a point.

Both central performances are solid. Playing a couple with years of marriage under their belt, Anderson and Isaacs have decent chemistry — even if the pair are rather too glamorous with their perfectly windswept hair to be believably penniless and roughing it. But the real problem is the pacing; the film feels baggy and repetitive and fizzles out instead of reaching a dramatic conclusion. It's all nice enough, while also feeling indistinct and unmemorable.

It would be hard to make the Cornish coastline look ugly and there is solid work here from cinematographer Hélène Louvart (*La Chimera*, *The Lost Daughter*). But when the journey is this meandering and anticlimactic, the prettiness of the scenery isn't quite enough to keep you going. **LAURA VENNING**

KILLER QUOTE

"Gee whizz — cake police!"
MOTH WIN (JASON ISAACS)

VERDICT **Engaging turns from Anderson and Isaacs can't elevate a narrative that ultimately goes nowhere, although it might make you want to get the tent out of the attic at long last.**

Brothers in arms.

FILM

THE ACCOUNTANT 2

THE LONG-AWAITED (TAX) RETURN OF BEN AFFLECK'S ACTION HERO

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **132 MINS**

DIRECTOR Gavin O'Connor
CAST Ben Affleck, Jon Bernthal, Cynthia Addai-Robinson, Daniella Pineda, J.K. Simmons

PLOT When private eye King (Simmons) is murdered, his accountant/assassin associate Christian Wolff (Affleck) takes over his last case.

GAVIN O'CONNOR'S *THE ACCOUNTANT* (2016), written by Bill Dubuque, introduced Christian Wolff (Ben Affleck): a buttoned-down number-cruncher with a sideline as a vigilante avenger. It was a big enough hit for 'Untitled Accountant Sequel' to go immediately into development but it's taken nearly a decade for that project to get off the back burner. Given how long it's been, it's an accomplishment that O'Connor and Dubuque call in so many of the original cast — the only absentee is Anna Kendrick, the civilian hero last time out — though you'd be forgiven for not quite remembering who they all are. Then again, it's easy to pick up the threads between shoot-outs.

The Wolff brothers, Christian and Brax (Jon Bernthal) — once estranged, now on course for bickering-buddy status — team up to help embattled federal agent Marybeth (Cynthia Addai-Robinson) get on the corpse-littered trail of walking MacGuffin Anaïs (Daniella Pineda). Initially a victim of human trafficking, Anaïs has suffered a head injury and developed 'acquired savant syndrome' whereby ordinary folk wake up with a) amnesia and b) super-genius assassination abilities. A victim, she's also dangerous — offering professional killer Brax competition in the murder market – and there's some tension about whether she has to be killed or rescued.

Like so many action films of the last 15 years — not to mention all iterations of the *Jack Reacher* franchise — the *Accountant* movies are superhero films for audiences who can't take capes and spandex seriously. Besides having J.K. Simmons' J.J. Jameson-alike as a plot-instigating early sacrifice, it offers recent incumbents of Batman and the Punisher in roles which derive as much from comic books as pulp paperbacks. The Wolff brothers' tech support comes from a school for hackers which is just a jump-jet away from being a Charles Xavier project. Anaïs may have a named medical condition, but she's basically Wolverine. It's a fairly long picture at 132 minutes — another Marvel/DC trait — and its impossibly intricate storyline is still just an excuse to pit kill-crazy good guys against hordes of indistinguishable thugs we can be sure deserve to be cut up, knocked down and riddled with bullets.

Recent American bugbears — human trafficking, El Salvadorian gangs — are invoked, but the vigilante field is so crowded there must be a worldwide shortage of killable goons. *The Accountant* has to look hard to find human traffickers left alive after Jason Statham's Working Man took them down a month or so ago while working up to the rare sinister bosses who survived the rampage of Rami Malek's the Amateur. **KIM NEWMAN**

VERDICT **Affleck and Bernthal make a funny, if morally dubious, double act, as Christian's obsessive-compulsive disorder lets sociopathic hit man Brax think of himself as the 'normal' brother. Best bit: the line-dancing scene.**

Here: "Get a grip!"
Below: She couldn't find her kitchen tongs anywhere.

FILM

THE UNINVITED

PARTYING-HARD TRUTHS IN HOLLYWOOD

★★★

OUT **9 MAY** / CERT **15** / **98 MINS**

DIRECTOR Nadia Conners
CAST Elizabeth Reaser, Walton Goggins, Lois Smith, Pedro Pascal, Rufus Sewell, Eva De Dominici

PLOT Under-strain Hollywood couple Sammy (Goggins) and Rose (Reaser) throw a party that's crashed by two uninvited guests (Smith, Pascal). Chaos ensues.

'WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW' goes the old adage, and Hollywood scribes have long dipped their sharp quills into the inky working methods and attitudes of their own industry. And it's not about to stop anytime soon — as Hollywood continues to navigate the seismic changes of #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, streaming platforms, the pandemic and the SAG-AFTRA strike, and just as Seth Rogen's Apple TV+ series *The Studio* gears up for its finale, we now have Nadia Conners' heartfelt comedy-drama *The Uninvited* landing in cinemas to take its turn peering beyond the veneer.

Conners is married in real life to Walton Goggins, who thanks to the likes of *The White Lotus* has found himself the man-of-the-moment at 53. She therefore knows of what she speaks when offering this tale of once-celebrated theatre actress Rose (Elizabeth Reaser), now in her forties and unable to catch a gig. While she's just been dismissed as too old to play the mother of a child who's the same age as her actual son, her former co-star, Gerald (Rufus Sewell), is hotter than ever, with Rose's agent husband Sammy (Goggins) throwing a party in his honour. There's an ulterior motive, naturally — Sammy hopes to coax Gerald into coming with him as he sets up his own talent agency.

Originally developed as a play, *The Uninvited* betrays its origins by offering two or three monologues too many, these moments of exposition feeling too spotlighted even if the uniformly strong cast prove ready for their close-ups. Less stagey is the cinematography of Robert Leitzell, who fluidly tracks the principals throughout the house, into the garden and onto a bedroom balcony to open the action out. The finger buffet is grazed, $200 shots of Bourbon are gulped, lines of coke are snorted, a photographer snaps each guest's aura, and not one but two uninvited guests crash the soirée: the first, Helen (Lois Smith), a bewildered, nonagenarian one-time actor who thinks this is her home; the second, Lucien (Pedro Pascal), a star who once dated Rose and wants her back.

Particularly pointed and poignant on how Hollywood treats women at the various stages of their careers, the film also dares to chisel into the cracks of Rose and Sammy's marriage and to speak frankly about the downsides of motherhood. "The person you miss is yourself," concludes Rose, who offers a detailed, blistering rebuff to an in-demand ingénue (Eva De Dominici) who's extended a well-meaning supposition on the joys of being a mom. Tinseltown likes to present a surface of glitter but the truth is far more grainy, says Conners. Here, she's thrown a party where everybody, not just Helen, is lost. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

VERDICT **Jazzily scored and cut, *The Uninvited* hangs in the Hollywood hills and vibes like a '90s indie. It's no *Swingers* but it's well-acted and makes entertainment of its earnest themes.**

also out

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DEATH OF A UNICORN
★★ FILM
"Yet another Rich People Are Bad film, comprised of *White-Lotus*-reject characters. For a scathing satire of late-stage capitalism, your targets must be laser-focused and your arguments refreshingly original; this has neither." **JOHN NUGENT**

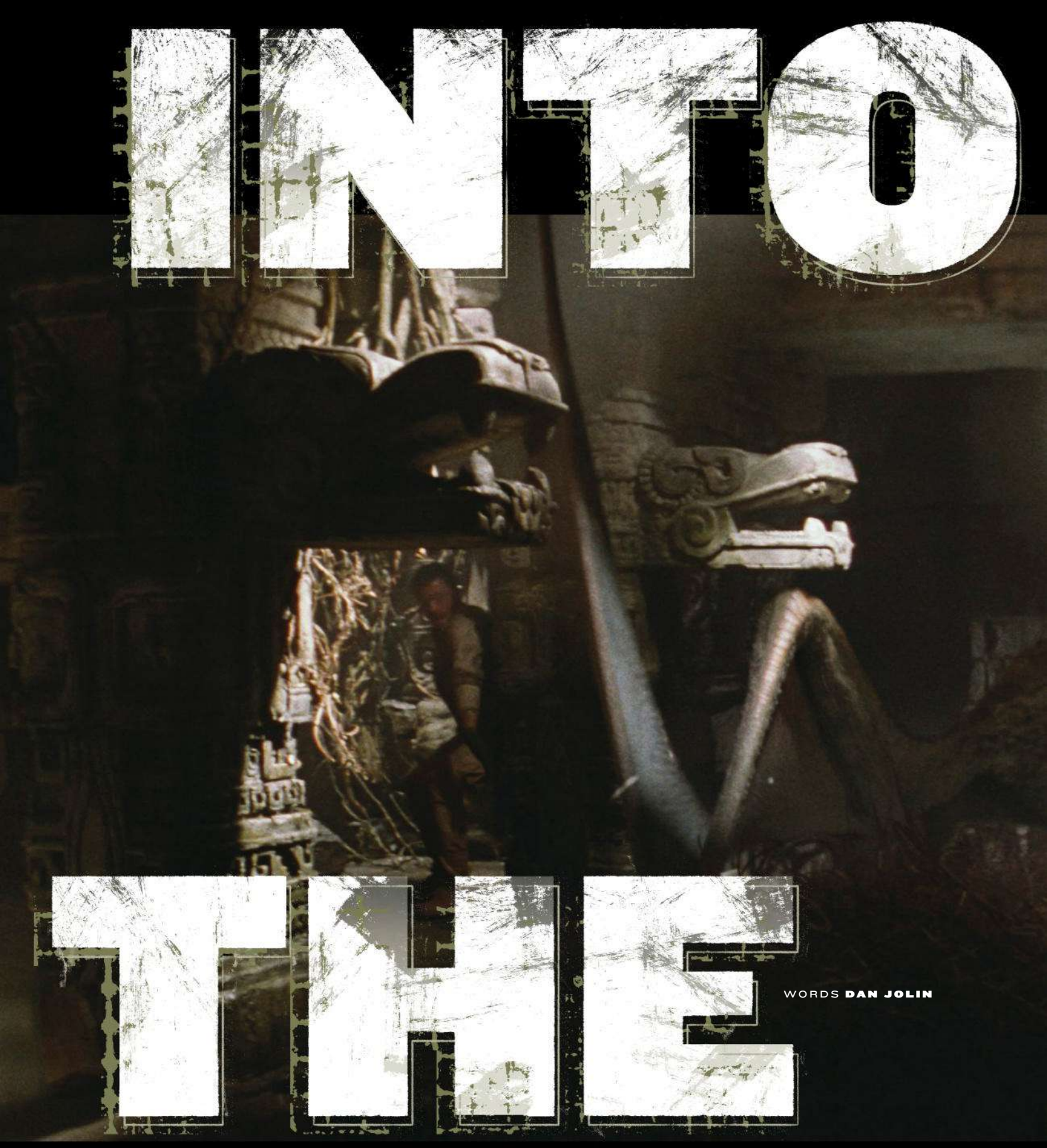
G20
★★★ FILM
"It is nonsense, and subject to the usual pitfalls of streaming actioners. But it delivers what it sets out to: sofaplex thrills that'll go down easy on a Friday night, in which the President snaps a mercenary's neck with a machine gun. She's got our vote." **BEN TRAVIS**

DOCTOR WHO: 'THE ROBOT REVOLUTION'
★★★ TV
"With all of time and space as its playground, *Who* can sometimes feel a little weightless and whimsical, inconsequential even. But for those who stick around, there is meat to be found on the bones of this silly space caper." **JORDAN KING**

CLOUD
★★★★ FILM
"Kiyoshi Kurosawa's latest film is a chilly and mystifying expression of a modern malevolence which hangs over our lives — like a cloud, if you will — worsened by constant digital connection." **KAMBOLE CAMPBELL**

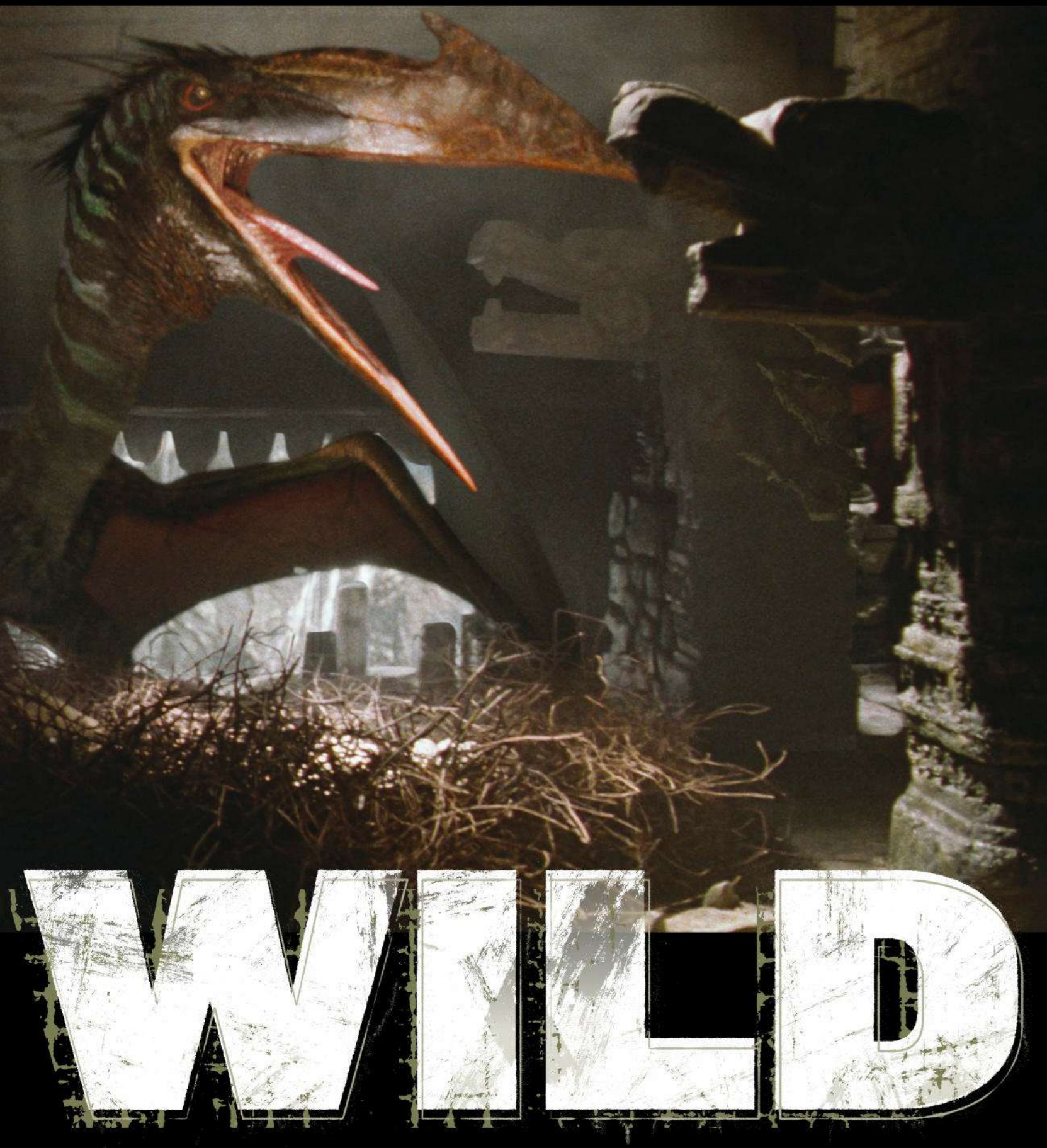
LAST SWIM
★★★ FILM
"A moving story that manages to steer clear of the usual hammed-up adolescent angst. The result is a quietly powerful refresh of the coming-of-age genre." **MIRIAM BALANESCU**

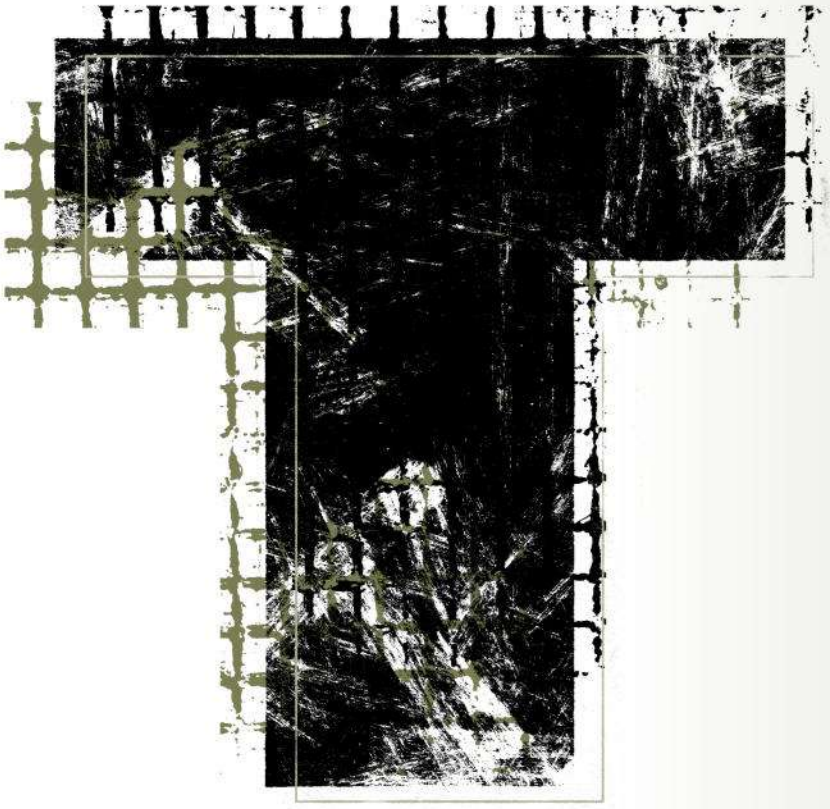
INTO THE



WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

AS SCARLETT JOHANSSON LEADS A TEAM INTO TERRIFYING TERRAIN, JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH HERALDS A BRAND-NEW ERA IN DINOSAUR SCARES. AND, OUT HERE IN THE JUNGLE, THINGS ARE GONNA BE A LOT LESS CIVILISED...


WILD



Clockwise from main: Covert-ops expert Zora Bennett (Scarlett Johansson) and paleontologist Henry Loomis (Jonathan Bailey) hang out; The Spinosaurus attacks; Director Gareth Edwards gets stuck in.

"This," beams Jonathan Bailey, "is about as *Jurassic* as it gets!"

It is late September 2024, a few hours after sunset, and *Empire* has joined the actor on the backlot of Sky Studios Elstree, where *Jurassic World Rebirth* is rounding off a full-pelt summer-long shoot. Bailey's not wrong. We are hit with an overwhelming sense of familiarity. There are the tall wire-fences signposted, "Danger: 10,000 Volts", which stand in front of thick, tropical foliage. There's the presence of an electric Jeep which, despite a new paint job, bears that classic Rex-skeleton logo. And, most pertinently, there are the carnivorous dinosaurs. Tonight, says Bailey with a grin, "the Raptors are out".

The cameras roll and, in character as intrepid paleontologist Henry Loomis, the bespectacled actor steps forward intently. He's grimed-up and sweat-soaked like his fellow cast members: Scarlett Johansson as military specialist Zora Bennett, Mahershala Ali as her seasoned comrade Duncan Kincaid, and Rupert Friend as Martin Krebs, the morally suspect company-man who's bankrolled this expedition-gone-horribly-wrong. Together with the dishevelled, shipwrecked family (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo, Luna Blaise, David Iacono, Audrina Miranda) that's complicated their dino-DNA-harvesting mission on a remote Atlantic island, they stand, frozen in fear, on the forecourt of a long-abandoned gas station as the Velociraptors approach.

Or rather, the Raptors' stand-ins: a pair of performers stalking forwards in black bodysuits, their heads bobbing beneath long-snouted helmets detailed with the deadly predators' distinctive features. Friend points his pistol at them. They pause, spooked, then back away, disappearing into the misty night. "Yeah, you better run!" Friend yells, but Bailey cautions him. "No, that wasn't the gun," he says. "It was something else."

We might be back on very familiar territory, but there's something new lurking in its flora. Something worse. Something even the Raptors fear.

It's really a horror film," says director Gareth Edwards, his still-boyish features poking out the top of a long raincoat. He's talking here about the original *Jurassic Park*, but the fact he's expressing this while in the midst of making his own *Jurassic* movie suggests to *Empire* it's a mission statement for *Rebirth*, too. "It's the sort of horror you enjoy, rather than stuff that will traumatise you forever," he continues. "Like the way people enjoy fairground rides. But it's full-on darkness, right?"

Aside from his previous gargantuan-creature features (2010's self-funded guerrilla debut *Monsters* and 2014's *Godzilla*) and his experiences in the sci-fi sphere (2016's *Rogue*

One: A Star Wars Story, 2023's *The Creator*), the Nuneaton-born filmmaker's *Jurassic* fervour and knowledge make him especially qualified to take on its sixth sequel. He reflects fondly on first seeing the '93 original when he'd just turned 18. "There's a dotted line in the history of cinema: 'Before' and 'After *Jurassic Park*'," he says. And in his own life, too: *Jurassic Park*'s ground-breaking, photo-real creature CGI was one of the reasons he went on to work in visual effects, before striking out as a director.

Oddly enough, the day Edwards read that Universal was looking for someone to helm the latest in the series (*Bullet Train*'s David Leitch having declined an offer), he'd just finished re-watching *Jurassic Park* for the umpteenth time, while taking copious notes. ("I do that now and again with films I really like, where I try and analyse them and see where they're good.") He forwarded the news article to his agent with the message, "Is this stupid?", only to find that producer Frank Marshall — who'd made the previous three *Jurassic Worlds* — had already just got in touch to gauge Edwards' interest. ›

"THIS IS A NEW ERA OF *JURASSIC WORLD*. WE WANTED TO REINVIGORATE THE FRANCHISE."

FRANK MARSHALL

Although, Marshall confesses he wasn't at the time aware the director was a fan; he'd simply approached him, he says, because "Gareth's a fantastic visual stylist, who had all the elements we needed in order to do this movie in the right way".

After reading and loving the script by David Koepp, who's returned to Jurassic Park (or World, as it is now known) for the first time since writing the first two, Steven Spielberg-directed movies, Edwards found himself in a room with the primo park-keeper himself: Spielberg is an executive producer on this film. "The only thing I can compare it to is having to show George Lucas around the set of a *Star Wars* film," Edwards says, speaking from experience. "I definitely believe I am in the Matrix and I chose 'film director' as my simulation, because this shouldn't really happen!"

For his part, Koepp is very pleased that Spielberg and Edwards hit it off. "Gareth is terrific," the writer says. "He's such a great match for this." While he doesn't quite follow Edwards' 'horror movie' take, Koepp does concur that *Rebirth* looks back to the original film, even while it leaps forwards. "We decided early on that, because the first and second trilogies have concluded their stories, let's not restrict ourselves in any way — let's have all-new characters in an all-new location," he says of a plot which picks up five years after *Jurassic World Dominion*, when dinosaurs have struggled to survive in most human-habited environments and regressed to the equatorial regions. After *Dominion*'s climactic twin-trilogy cast mash-up, we're now meeting a whole new gang with no link to either Team Park or Team World (aside from a minor detail, Bailey teases, which provides "a connection between Loomis and Alan Grant"). The whole point, says Marshall, was "to start a new era of *Jurassic World*. We really wanted to reinvigorate the franchise." The clue is in the title.

Yet this revitalisation couldn't work without some early '90s DNA, Koepp explains. "Steven

Above: Newbie gang Martin Krebs (Rupert Friend), Duncan Kincaid (Mahershala Ali), Zora and Henry skirt the fence. **Here:** The magnificent Mosasaurus versus Duncan's boat the Essex.

UNLEASH THE BEASTS

#1: THE T-REX

WHEN DAVID KOEPP returned to Michael Crichton's source text for inspiration for *Rebirth*, one episode from the first book stood out to him: a tense pursuit involving a river-raft being chased by the T-Rex. It was a sequence Koepp and Steven Spielberg wanted to include in the original movie, but never got past the storyboarding stage due to budgetary concerns. Now, it could finally be… reborn.

"Both Steven and I said, 'Hey, now we can do it!'" says the screenwriter. "When I was re-reading the novel, I told him, 'Yeah, it's as good as we remember. We *have* to have this.' Because it was just a great idea for a scene, and if only one dinosaur character recurs, it has to be the T-Rex."

In the edit suite, Gareth Edwards runs the entire sequence for *Empire*. It is still such a work in progress we can see brief VFX-free flashes of its shooting location, Lee Valley White Water Centre in Waltham Cross. ("It was freezing," says Edwards. "I felt really bad for the cast.") There's a great gag involving a self-inflating dinghy, and somehow a hungry T-Rex is even scarier when slowed by deep water.

But this is a different breed of Tyrannosaur than we've seen previously. Unlike 'Rexy' from *Jurassic Park* and the previous *World* trilogy, it is bigger, beefier and even surlier. "If you were dinosaurs making a film, you wouldn't say, 'Now here comes a human, and then we've got another human here,'" explains Edwards in his own idiosyncratic way. "You would say, 'Here comes Robert De Niro, and there's Javier Bardem.' The original *Jurassic Park* T-Rex is one actor. Now here's another one."

So this is the Javier Bardem of T-Rexes? "Well, the place I tried to pull everything towards was the way people thought T-Rexes looked before we knew better," Edwards reveals. "So we looked at some of the designs in Ray Harryhausen's films, like *The Valley Of Gwangi*." Feeling it would be sacrilegious, almost, to try and top the iconic, "near perfect" design of Rexy, Edwards instead decided to tap into his childhood. Like ol' Gwangi, the result, he says, "is kind of how, as a kid, I always thought a T-Rex would look. I'm super-happy with it."

and I said, 'Let's go back to the tone we're most comfortable with, which is closer to the tone of the first movie.' Although, not in a nostalgic way; I don't like excessive nostalgia." Writing the script, he says, was "just a ball. I went back and read [Michael] Crichton's two novels again, just to get myself back in the proper headspace."

Johansson, who insists that being in a *Jurassic* was "my dream since I saw the first one when I was 11", certainly saw this in Koepp's script. While *Rebirth*'s stripped-down mission-movie narrative is more contained, she says, "it hearkens back to the first one. It has a lot of good jump-scares, and the stakes are high." Bailey, meanwhile, describes this movie as "a love letter" to the OG *Park* (to the extent that Edwards, for the first time in his career, shot on old-school 35mm film rather than digitally). "It really does feel that it's welcoming people to really celebrate the original film," says the actor. "It has that wonder and awe, while not being scared to re-inject the thrill and the fear." ›

Of course, to achieve all that thundering shock and awe, there is one very special yet essential ingredient Edwards and his team absolutely had to get right. Go colossal or go home.

"Spoiler alert," deadpans Edwards, "but there might be a dinosaur in this."

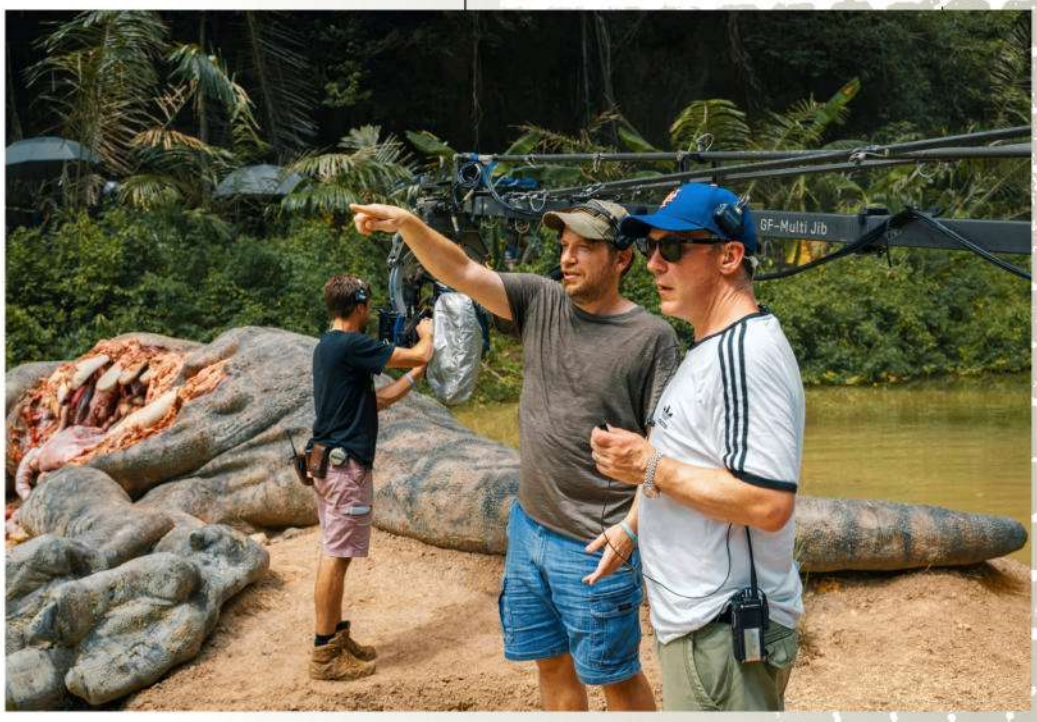
We have re-joined the director in early March 2025 at his Soho edit suite, where he, editor Jabez Olssen and ILM's local team under VFX supervisor David Vickery are pulling seven-day weeks to deliver their *Rebirth* in time for the film's 2 July due date. Olssen kindly cues up a work-in-progress sequence he and Edwards have prepared for *Empire*'s hungry eyes. Set out on the Atlantic ocean (but filmed largely in the same Maltese water tank used by Ridley Scott for *Gladiator II*), it sees Zora and her crew sailing dangerously close to a Mosasaurus (the huge, chompy sea monster that, in *Jurassic World*, gobbled a great white like it was whitebait), to hit it with a DNA-extracting dart-gadget. The scene is bright, brash, splashy and fun, with the sea beast in question exhibiting much more character than we've seen previously. It is, it turns out, as wily as it is burly.

"Each dinosaur encounter has its own vibe and style," says Edwards, who describes his dino cast as a "greatest hits" of new and old. The 'new' include jet-sized pterosaur the Quetzalcoatlus, a couple of towering Titanosaurs (which, we are told, get "amorous"), and a cute little Aquilops (think Triceratops crossed with meerkat) that befriends the youngest Delgado. Then there are the mutants: horrific, gene-spliced miscreations, cooked up at a now-deserted InGen facility 17 years earlier. "Those came from my strange mind," Koepp tells us. "We saw in some of the previous *Jurassic World* movies that their experiments made dinosaurs bigger, meaner, scarier, and it occurred to me and Steven that those can't all have gone well. This is genetic experimentation. Things are not going to work out sometimes."

Alongside the lumbering, trailer-glimpsed Distortus Rex (see page 55), we'll also meet the Mutadons. These feathered fiends originated in an unexpected, heart-in-mouth animal encounter Koepp had while doing some DIY on his front porch. "I saw these hideous little claws come out, and then this bat pulled itself up out of the hollow space in the column," he recalls. "It was three in the afternoon, so he was very irritated. Then he stretched out his wings, which were skinny, scary and weird, and so big they could wrap around your body twice. I thought, '*That's* going in a movie!'" Edwards sums up the Mutadons as "a combination of a pterosaur and a Raptor. So they can fly." *Now* we get why those regular Raptors were so alarmed.

Which brings us to the 'old' camp, where the "clever girls" are naturally joined by a T-Rex (see page 51), but also *Jurassic Park III*'s fan-favourite boss-monster the Spinosaurus. It now has a chunkier tail, thanks to its new paleontological rep as a primarily aquatic predator, and rocks up as a troublesome trio during the Mosasaurus sequence — which *Empire* can attest sends a love letter to a certain other Spielberg joint. "You can't put a fin in the water and have it be a threat to people on a boat without thinking of a particular film," Edwards smiles. "And I would feel really guilty about this, except for the fact that the screenplay was given to me by Steven Spielberg."

Jaws isn't the only non-*Jurassic* Spielberg riff *Empire* notices during our wanderings around Elstree. Inside the gas-station mini-mart, for example, we spot a rack of Devil's Tower key rings (referencing *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*) and a magazine whose cover oddly celebrates the 18th anniversary of *Back To The Future*, which he executive-produced. More impressively, the set for the Quetzalcoatlus sequence — where the team try to raid the clifftop nest of prehistory's largest flying predator — is an ancient Mesoamerican temple whose clinging vines and snarling stone statues bring to mind *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. "I had to resist the urge to put in



Clockwise from here: Life finds a way; You can hide... but try running?; It's behind you! Edwards and crew on set; Duncan tries to protect young Isabella Delgado (Audrina Miranda).

"THIS IS GENETIC EXPERIMENTATION. THINGS ARE NOT GOING TO WORK OUT SOMETIMES."

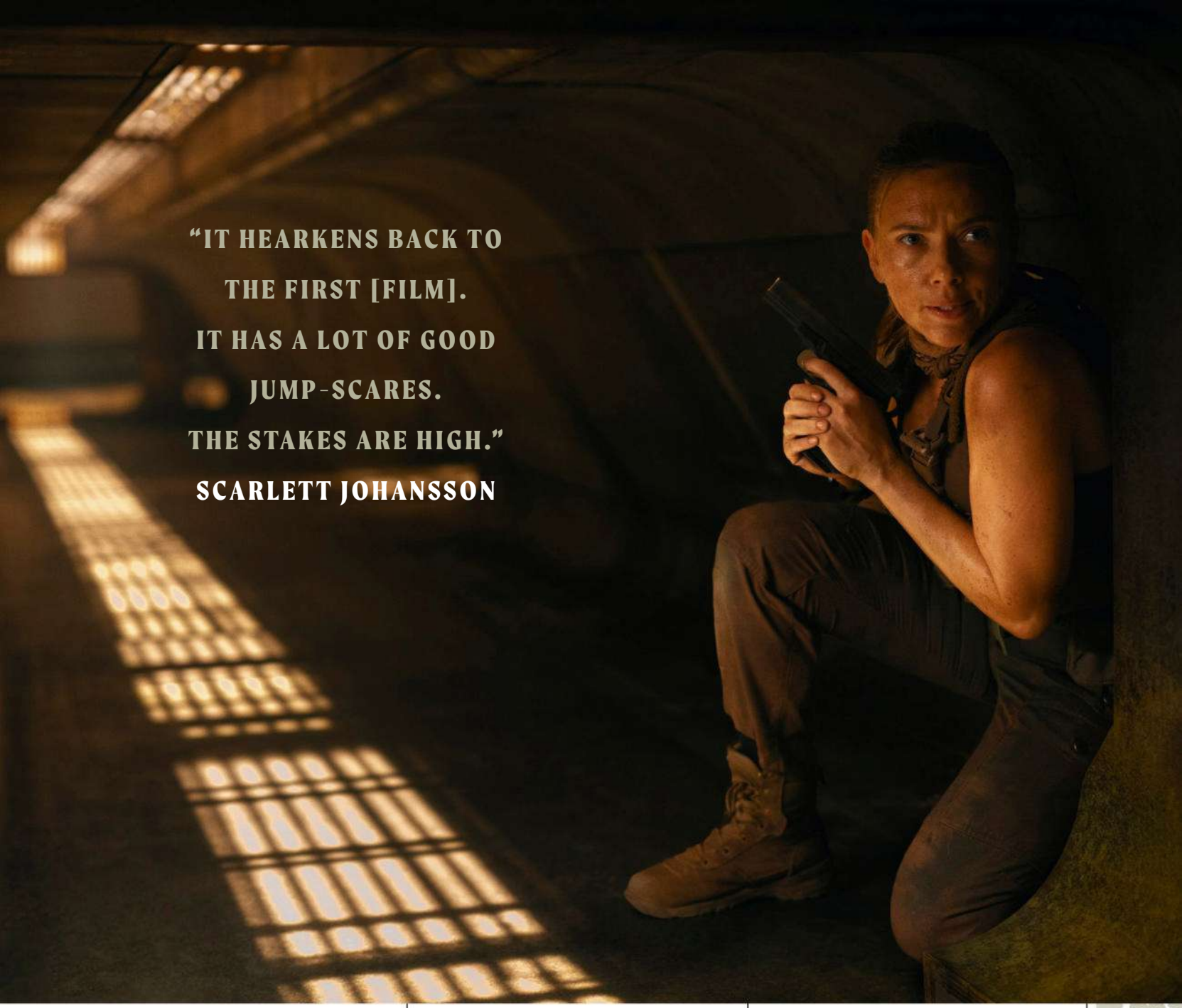
DAVID KOEPP

booby traps," winks Koepp.

However, Edwards wasn't simply hired because he was a Spielberg fan. He was, says Marshall, marked out for his visual style, most recently highlighted by *The Creator*, where he honed his fluid, light-footed, location-driven approach to VFX and world-building, discovering moments in-camera then seamlessly augmenting them using CGI. In the edit suite, we ask the director how that innovative methodology gelled with a 32-year-old franchise.

"I mean, this is obviously a giant machine," he says. "You have to lay the tracks in front of the train. But, that said, we sort of met in the middle. There's a bit of handheld [camerawork] in this film, so I got to shoot some stuff a little bit more guerrilla-ish, where the actors could do whatever they wanted, and I'd try and find all the beautiful compositions in it as they did the scene. I felt that gave a little bit of a realistic edge."

This distinctive organic quality required the production to be as adventurous as its characters. "I was super-keen that we go to real locations," says Edwards, "and really try and do as little on ›



"IT HEARKENS BACK TO THE FIRST [FILM]. IT HAS A LOT OF GOOD JUMP-SCARES. THE STAKES ARE HIGH."
SCARLETT JOHANSSON

the backlot as possible." In other words, he had to take his cast and crew out into the wild. Where real predators roam.

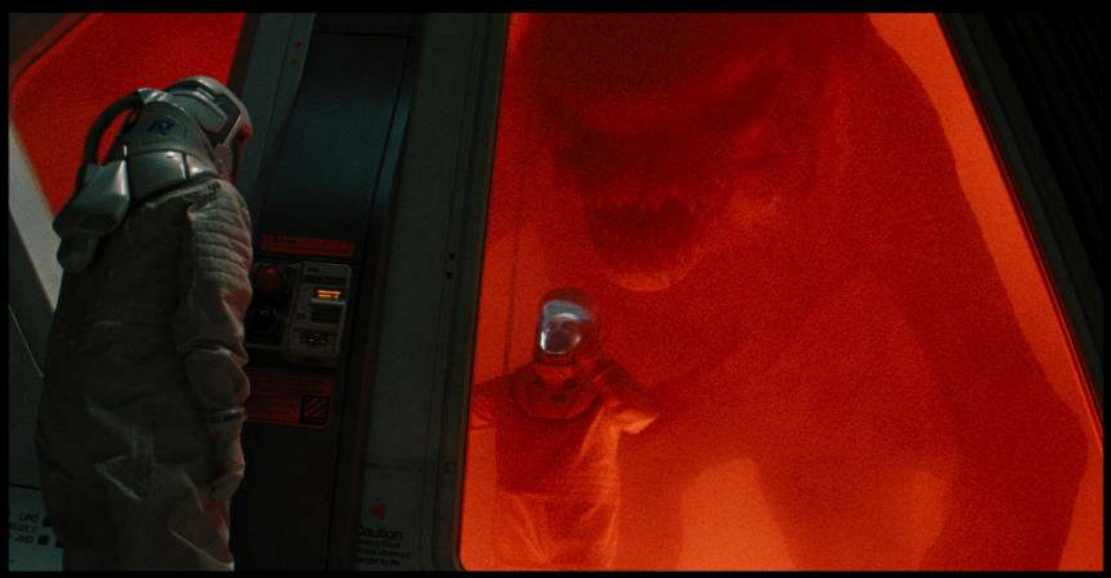
Rupert Friend's strongest memory of the *Rebirth* shoot involves being up to his neck in the murky water of a Thai mangrove swamp. "Oh, don't touch that little red bug there," he recalls being told. "'Why not?' 'It's deadly. You'll die if you touch that.' 'Okay. Might have been good to know that before, but alright!'" Bailey, meanwhile, remembers the reptiles. "There were really dangerous water snakes swimming past us," he says, happily. "So the fear and adrenaline was as real as it could be." He also loved the fact that, on the first day of shooting on a remote island, the rain was so bad it caused a mudslide. "I thought, 'This is brilliant!'"

As Johansson puts it, "The conditions were *tough*. The jungle is not an easy place to visit, and it's certainly a hard place to shoot. We were in Thailand during monsoon season. And then we went to Malta in August." The incredible summer heat in this latter locale was exacerbated by the fact that, with roughly a third of the film taking place on the ocean, they spent weeks in Malta Film Studios' water tank. "There was no escape from the sun," says Johansson of working on the Mosasaurus/Spinosaurus hunt scenes. "It was just baking every day. And you're on this rig, 30 feet in the air or whatever it is, and it's moving up and down and sideways, and there's all this water being shot out of these cannons towards you. It was brutal. To do it one day would be hard. But to do it continuously for, like, six weeks or whatever..."

Whenever he misses Malta, Edwards jokes, "I just put some blue-screen in the oven, turn it up to 400 degrees and stick my head in for a while, because that what it felt like." He confesses to feeling a little guilty about what he put his actors through. "At the end of each day, I'd try and reassure them that tomorrow was going to be easier because of this reason. And then the next day would be even harder for either precisely that reason, or a brand-new other reason. After a while, they just stopped believing me."

Still, the cast don't begrudge him their adventure, especially as he and his crew were right there with them. "When you're wading through the mangroves and you see them all in wetsuits and they're all submerged, it shows how everyone was literally neck-deep in the filmmaking," says Bailey. Friend, meanwhile, embraced the value of shooting in real environments. "Gareth really wanted to include as much of the human, the physical as possible," he says. "And I think it translates. We talked a lot about our mutual love for the films of the '70s and '80s and why these types of big action films felt better then. Gareth's kind of obsessed with that. I think we recognise when we see someone going through a genuine experience versus a simulated one. You can't stop the feeling of, 'What was that winding through my legs? What's landing on my head? What's flicking across the water just out of sight?' There's

Zora puts those expert covert-ops skills into practice.



UNLEASH THE BEASTS
#2: THE D-REX

THE FINAL SCENE Gareth Edwards plays for *Empire* in the *Rebirth* edit suite is actually the film's opening scene. Set 17 years ago, it takes place at an InGen facility, where hazmat-suit-wearing technicians have been tinkering with dino DNA, winding up with perhaps the nastiest, weirdest-looking creature we've yet seen in the *Jurassic* series: the Distortus Rex, or D-Rex. Although, in true horror fashion, the prologue only grants the briefest, shadiest glimpses of it, swathed in dry ice. "You go into all this detail [while designing it] and then it's like, 'Okay, now let's hide it, and hide it even more, and leave it to the imagination even more,'" Edwards says.

As soon as he read Koepp's script, he could see the D-Rex, he recalls, in his peripheral vision. He thought, "Okay, I know what that looks like. I can imagine that." Similar to his T-Rex (see page 51), what he imagined was drawn from some of his favourite childhood monsters. "It's kind of like if the T-Rex was designed by H.R. Giger," he says, referring to the Swiss surrealist creator of *Alien*'s title creature, "and then that whole thing had sex with a Rancor (*from* Return Of The Jedi). It's a design that I was really happy with. I'd like to buy the toy of it when it comes out."

Empire is allowed a good look at this six-limbed freak during a visit upstairs to the VFX floor, where supervisor David Vickery is running through some process shots fresh in from ILM's San Francisco base. It's hard to improve on Edwards' description. It is truly a *beast*. Though one which, Edwards and Vickery hope, will elicit some mixed emotions.

"It's as if another animal has been wrapped around the T-Rex," says Vickery of the bulbous-headed *thing* we see, whose little Rex fore-claws sit alongside a pair of burly, gorilla-like arms. "Gareth wanted us to feel sorry for it as well as terrified, because its deformities have caused it some pain, and there's an encumbrance to it. It's a bit like Sloth from *The Goonies*: initially you're horrified by something, but by the end you empathise with it."

Hey, you guys! Prepare for mutant mayhem.

something it does physiologically, I think, which the camera sees and gives to the audience."

Koepp agrees, though for him there was another benefit to venturing far from the comforts of the studio. "It pays off because it looks not like a soundstage and not like a place we've been a million times before," he says. "We wanted to recapture the idea that we are in the dinosaurs' environment. The last few movies were exploring the idea of, 'Hey, what would it be like if they were in *our* environment?' They did that very well, and now we wanted to explore how it felt to go back to theirs." Not that the writer himself suffered through the jungle or ocean shoots. "I waited until they were on the stage in London [for the final few weeks] and then I was like, 'Hey, I'll come visit you guys!'"

When he arrived, though, he was briefly disorientated. As Koepp strolled through the backlot jungle, he had an unexpected sensory flashback. "It smelled exactly the same as it did 30 years ago," he says. "I don't know if they were using the same fake trees, or what it was, but it smelled like 30 years ago. So that was a little odd."

It's not inconceivable that, should he choose to remain in the *Jurassic* arena he helped build all those years ago, Koepp will be inhaling the Proustian scent of soundstage foliage for years to come. Though whether we'll be re-joining Zora's gang (at least, the ones who remain unmasticated by Mutadons) or meeting a whole new crew remains unclear. "We're keeping both of those ideas in play, let's say it that way," hedges Marshall. "But, you know, it's such a wonderful cast. I hope we can figure out what to do next with them." Edwards hasn't been involved in any 'Rebirth 2' talk. "I haven't heard a single comment from anyone about sequels," he says. "But I'm a great believer in just trying to make a great film and the rest will take care of itself. It feels like a blank canvas ahead."

To Koepp, the point is less about what exactly will fill that canvas than the fact there's still so much enthusiasm for it — despite mixed reviews, *Dominion* bagged $1 billion. "There's a magical nature to [the *Jurassic* films] that has always held," he says. He recalls the childhood trips he'd make from his small Wisconsin town to Chicago's Field Museum to gawp at its bizarre, huge, yet somehow relatable skeletons. "They were so massive, but they are not monsters. They are *animals*. I remember on the first movie, there was a rule that if you ever refer to them as "monsters", you have to put a dollar in the jar. They are animals and they have the motivations of animals. We see a lot of monster movies, and the monsters usually have some malevolent streak. But dinosaurs follow animal rules, like your dog might. Most importantly, they're not around anymore, so they're safe. They're a safe, terrifying, exciting fantasy."

And that is about as *Jurassic* as it gets.

JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 2 JULY**

IMMACULATE CONCEPTIONS

WORDS JOHN NUGENT

OVER A SINGULAR CAREER, **WES ANDERSON** HAS MOUNTED HIS MOVIES WITH UNCOMPROMISING PRECISION. NOW, AS HE UNVEILS **THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME**, HE TELLS US WHY HE LIKES THINGS TO BE PICTURE-PERFECT

PROLOGUE

A Punctilious Prelude

THE telephone rings. A voice emerges from the other line, clear and crisp and deliberate. "Hello," says the voice. "This is Wes. I'm calling at exactly five o'clock. Right on the dot."

That is director Wes Anderson, applying as much care and attention-to-detail to his press commitments as he does to his films. Anderson's conversation with *Empire* begins as if in character: meticulous, fastidious, punctual to the second. We can't see him, but it's a safe bet he is wearing an immaculate tweed suit-and-tie combo.

The Texas-born director's panache is now legendary. Across 11 films, he has practically established a genre all of his own, a corner of his beloved art form unique to him. From quirky crime comedy *Bottle Rocket* to the grand family saga of *The Royal Tenenbaums* to the Eastern European capers of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, Anderson now has a remarkable body of work, his films in dialogue with each other, a rich visual shelf of living pop-up books, teeming with eccentric characters and intricate depictions of family life.

Joining that canon is *The Phoenician Scheme*, another assiduously crafted affair with an oddball sense of humour, told through a Euro-centric lens. It tells the story of Zsa-zsa Korda (Benicio Del Toro), a ruthless businessman in post-war Europe attempting an ambitious infrastructure scheme while trying to reconnect with his nun daughter Liesl (Mia Threapleton). It is darker and steelier than some of Anderson's work but still charming, sweet and handsomely mounted. And very, very Wes. "You never know how something works its way into what you end up getting on film," he ponders. But we'll have a go.

CHAPTER 1

The Substance Behind The Style

WES Anderson's films *are* beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that he can be dismissed as simply a stylist. But there's always an engine driving that perfectly calibrated beauty. "We always have something on our mind," he asserts.

Take 2014's *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, a sweet confection partly inspired by the novels of Austrian writer Stefan Zweig and the historical analysis of Nazi-occupied Europe by Hannah Arendt. Or 2023's *Asteroid City*, a goofy pastiche of a 1950s alien romp that's also a pandemic-inspired three-in-one meta-commentary on creativity and the cosmos. *The Phoenician Scheme*, too, is a sharply composed and carefully ordered diorama — with the real world underlying it all.

"The first inspiration for this movie is my father-in-law, Fouad Malouf," says Anderson. Malouf was a Lebanese businessman and construction engineer who fled his home country when civil war broke out in the mid-1970s. Like

Left: Wes Anderson shapes his vision for Mathieu Amalric, Mia Threapleton and Benicio Del Toro on set of *The Phoenician Scheme*. **Facing page, bottom:** Meeting suspended for Bjorn Lund (Michael Cera), Sister Liesl (Threapleton), Zsa-zsa Korda (Del Toro) and Marseille Bob (Amalric). **Below, top to bottom:** *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009); *Asteroid City* (2023); *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* (2005).

Malouf, Del Toro's character in the film, Zsa-zsa Korda, is a well-dressed industrialist with fingers in many pies, sky-high ambitions — and a daughter he loves very much, in his own way. The film is dedicated to Malouf. "There are many details from his life that are in the movie and in the character," Anderson explains, "but it's also inspired by various figures of the '50s and '60s: shipping magnates and automobile tycoons."

It's not the first Anderson film to borrow from historical figures: real-life oceanographer Jacques Cousteau was the template for Bill Murray's title character in 2004's *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, while the writer played by Jude Law and Tom Wilkinson in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is partly based on Zweig. And there are always big ideas brimming under that opulent surface, too: Zsa-zsa is constantly cheating death, which leads the film to a series of surreal black-and-white vignettes with biblical imagery, the businessman making regular visits to the pearly gates. Is this Anderson grappling with his mortality?

"I think the character sure is," he says. "He has so many near-death experiences. He's slightly hard to kill." The religious motif emerged almost accidentally during the writing process, drawing from the work of legendary Spanish surrealist auteur Luis Buñuel. "Buñuel's films are full of Catholicism," says Anderson. "His sense of humour, his particular take on God, had somehow gotten into our little writing room, me and [co-writer] Roman Coppola. There's probably something Buñuelian that we're pursuing."

Far from being a simple cinematic illustrator, Anderson is a polymath, always voraciously burying himself in all forms of art and media, high and low. Who else would watch Spanish avant-garde surrealist films *and* read books about mid-20th-century shipping magnates? "I borrow and steal from lots of different sources when I make a movie," he says. "The more ammunition you have in your arsenal when you set out to write your story, the better. I am always gathering things. You never quite know where the thing comes to you, that might actually be a whole movie." He thinks for a moment. "It could be, y'know, a cookbook." (A Wes Anderson adaptation of *Jamie's 30-Minute Meals*? We'd love to see it.)

CHAPTER 2

A Trusted Troupe

LIKE a touring theatre company, there are seasoned players on every Wes Anderson film. The director works so often with returning actors that Wikipedia has an entire 'Frequent collaborators' section on his filmography page, listing over 50 cast and crew. Sure enough, *The Phoenician Scheme* boasts a host of Anderson regulars, including Del Toro, Jeffrey Wright, Rupert Friend, Scarlett Johansson, Willem Dafoe, Bryan Cranston, and — of course — Bill Murray.

"It's great to have direct contact with a lot of actors who I love," says Anderson. "That's a tremendous luxury, and obviously nothing like my experience when I first started making film." (More on this later.) As is now his custom, many roles in *The Phoenician Scheme* were written for specific actors. "In this case, most of them ended up showing up."

That extends to the crew too. "The first movies I made, there were a few people we brought from one movie to the next. But now, we bring many, many people who worked on many of my films — not just the costume designer, but eight people in the costume department. Not just the director of photography, but the key grip, the first assistant camera, the second assistant camera, the loader. It's a bigger company than it was in the past, and it makes a big difference."

Every Anderson film encourages a famously convivial ambience away from the cameras, too. "It's very much a family atmosphere off the set," he says. During filming, Anderson's inner circle often stay in the same place, and break bread each evening after filming is done. On *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the cast and crew stayed in an actual hotel next door to the fake one they were working in, in the small German town of Görlitz. On *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, the Brazilian musician Seu Jorge serenaded the company each night with his David Bowie covers. On *Asteroid City*, it was even more musically lively: "Jarvis Cocker was there," recalls ›

Anderson. "Jeff Goldblum played piano. Even Tom and Rita Hanks gave musical performances."

On *The Phoenician Scheme*, it was a little less raucous. "It was a more rudimentary place," he says of their digs. "A bit like an airport-type hotel. But we made it our own. We had our own cooks."

'Twas not ever thus. While Anderson has now settled into a comfortable groove as an established name with a happy professional family, the stories of his early films are full of battles — for funding, for being heard and seen, for getting the right actor. For 1996's *Bottle Rocket*, he cast James Caan as criminal gardener Mr Henry; Caan was not, he admits, his first choice. "When we made our first movie, we didn't know any actors!" he says. "The part that James Caan played, we got turned down by so many people. For a while, I thought that I didn't want to settle on somebody — we should just absolutely insist that we get [an actor]. But eventually you realise you can't."

And then there was Gene Hackman. The tales of the recently departed titan of the screen having a torrid time on 2001's *The Royal Tenenbaums* are now legion. "He didn't want to do the movie," admits Anderson, bluntly. "I had to pursue him for a long time. And when I actually gave him the script, he did not want to do it." After persuasion from his agent, Hackman finally agreed, but did not enjoy the experience. (He would only make two more films before retiring from acting.)

"He wasn't gung-ho to be there," Anderson remembers. "But he was *the guy* for the part. I don't think he ever felt that during the movie. I think he felt it when he saw it when it was finished. He did tell me then that he liked the movie very much. But we felt it every time we made a scene with him. He was doing something that had a certain epic electricity to it. It was exciting to see it happen." Whether they want to be there or not — and increasingly, thankfully, they do — Anderson's films are nothing without his ensembles.

CHAPTER 3

Art For Art's Sake

IT'S tempting to think every Wes Anderson film looks the same. Less enlightened corners of the internet certainly do: there are online videos with titles like, 'Why Do Wes Anderson Movies Look Like That?' or, 'Wes Anderson's Unique Style: Repetitive or Refreshing?'

Wes Anderson, for the record, doesn't see it that way. "To do a shot is to think something up," he explains. "It's something you've staged. You're figuring out how to get it on film. That's all intentional. But when somebody says, 'That's your style,' well — that is *not* intentional," he says with a laugh. "That is just what happens when you put all my movies next to each other and start saying, 'Here's a lot of stuff you're doing that links these movies.' That's less my choice than my personality, probably."

He sounds largely bemused by the 'Make It Wes Anderson' trend that has erupted on TikTok. "I mean, TikTok isn't about telling a story necessarily," he says. "That's just visuals and little surface things, I guess. The things you'd use on a TikTok must be simple. A movie is usually a kind of complicated thing."

But he's largely unconcerned about how the world perceives him. So what if he's a meme? "I don't mind if somebody reduces it to one thing or another," he says. "Everybody has their own reaction, their own experience. Everybody's right, in a way. You can't really control that. That's just what it's like to make things, I think."

To Anderson, every one of his films is different, each telling an individual, singular story, each story driving a particular visual style.

Left: Zsa-zsa with varsity men Reagan (Bryan Cranston) and Leland (Tom Hanks). **Above right:** Classic Wes Anderson neat-and-tidy framing. **Below, top to bottom:** *Bottle Rocket* (1996); *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001); *The French Dispatch* (2021); *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).

Focus Features, Searchlight, Universal

"This movie, *The Phoenician Scheme*, what we're photographing is a bit steely and silver, and it's a bluer world," he says. "It's a darker story than, for instance, *Asteroid City*, which has this 1950s Eisenhower America hue. Every movie tells you what it wants to be."

It's not just how his films are made, he argues, but what is being filmed. "Part of it is, 'What are you doing with the photography?'" he says. "And then part of it is, *what* are you photographing?" The story drives the ship — not the other way around.

CHAPTER 4

Filling The Frame

SO what is it that is being photographed, as he puts it, in a Wes Anderson film? You can always expect pristine fashions and grooming, for one thing. Look out for the red hats in *The Life Aquatic* or the purple socks in *Grand Budapest*. ("I work with [veteran costume designer] Milena Canonero on many of my movies," Anderson notes. "She always brings a team of real artisans.") But again, it comes from story. Practically every male actor in *The Phoenician Scheme* boasts a splendid moustache, for example — not merely a hipster affectation. "I had an impulse to keep unifying this group of businessmen," the director explains. "They share this thing, which is: they are so wildly ambitious. They have a certain sort of uniform for being the top man in their world."

There are other methods of telling his story in visual ways. An avowed art fan, Anderson often uses mixed media, from animation to miniatures, to weave his tales, and regularly commissions artists for original work. For 2021's *The French Dispatch*, he hired Tilda Swinton's partner, the artist Sandro Kopp, to produce the original abstract paintings made by Benicio Del Toro's character Moses Rosenthaler. For *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the MacGuffin at the heart of the film, the painting 'Boy With Apple', was completed by artist Michael Taylor, commissioned over a year before filming. "We took our time."

The Phoenician Scheme went big, borrowing real masterpieces by real masters. "I thought, because [Zsa-zsa] is a collector and very rich, that we could see what it would be like to try to get real art," says Anderson. "So we have a real Magritte, a real Renoir... I hope they bring something authentic to it." Logistically, shipping priceless artworks onto a film set was not without its challenges. "If you're hanging a 16th-century wood carving on the wall, it doesn't arrive alone. It has a team. But we never regretted doing that. Sometimes we would just pause what we were doing and spend some time with the artworks. It *does something* to the room."

EPILOGUE

A Family Affair

THERE is one more factor to a Wes Anderson film which the many memes often fail to recognise: behind the rigid framing and deliberately stilted dialogue-delivery lies a well of emotion. His entire filmography is personal and full of pathos. *The Phoenician Scheme* is a tribute to his father-in-law, but also an exploration and reckoning of what it means to be a father. Is there a connection to Gene Hackman's Royal Tenenbaum, that other great muddled-but-well-meaning Andersonian patriarch?

"It's from the same well," he acknowledges. "When we made *The Royal Tenenbaums*, [co-writer] Owen Wilson and I were thinking about lots of different people with that character. Now, *I'm* somebody who has a daughter. It's a bit from the point of view of *being* a father. As little as my life shares with Zsa-zsa." It is perhaps his family which is the current running underneath all his work. And it is his chosen work family who keep his art so prolific, so rich and idiosyncratic and bursting with ideas and unexpected emotion, so much *life*.

At that, we say our goodbyes. Precisely at the point we are scheduled to finish our conversation, Wes Anderson politely wishes *Empire* a good evening, and hangs up the telephone.

THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 23 MAY**

Bad ROBOT?

THE LAST TIME WE SAW HER, SHE WAS A BRUTAL — AND VERY SASSY — KILLING MACHINE. NOW, THOUGH, WITH AN EVEN MORE DIABOLICAL AI LUNATIC AT LARGE, IT'S TIME FOR M3GAN 2.0. GET READY FOR THE MOTHER OF ALL GLOW-UPS

X-O-X-O

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

Allison Williams can't quite put her finger on the moment when she knew that M3GAN — the all-singing, all-dancing, all-slaying doll who lent her name to the movie of the same name — had become a bona fide icon. It might have been after the launch of the movie's trailer, in October 2022. "People were making memes about her already," Williams remembers.

Or maybe it was after the movie came out in January 2023, and quickly became one of Blumhouse's biggest hits, with a worldwide gross of $180 million (from a $12 million budget). Maybe it was the moment Williams — who starred as Gemma, the well-intentioned creator of M3GAN — appeared on *The Drew Barrymore Show* and was interviewed by the host in full M3GAN costume. ("Drew Barrymore crawling on the ground towards me in a M3GAN costume was something I'll never forget.") Or maybe it was the time when *Saturday Night Live* did a sketch, just two weeks after *M3GAN* opened, in which Williams showed up alongside Aubrey Plaza. "We were just like, 'This is surreal. This is incredible,'" she says.

That sketch is notable for a couple of reasons, and not just because it's under four minutes long, a rarity for *SNL*. It wasn't just a riff on *M3GAN*; it was a trailer for a spoof sequel, in which Plaza played another version of M3GAN who goes toe-to-toe with the original model. And its title? 'M3GAN 2.0'. "From the moment that sketch came out, we were like, 'That's probably what the sequel is called!'" laughs Williams.

Sure enough, fast-forward just over two years later and Williams once again finds herself starring in something called *M3GAN 2.0*. But this time it's the real deal, pitting M3GAN against a newer, faster, stronger, more lethal model. Not played by Aubrey Plaza, but *Ahsoka*'s Ivanna Sakhno. "It's the ultimate mean-girl showdown," promises Sakhno, "while remaining a very campy, cunty movie." Let's go, girls.

"That's absolutely fair," laughs Gerard Johnstone, director of both *M3GAN* movies, when he hears of Sakhno's succinct summary of his movie. "That's probably the best appraisal of the tone I've heard so far."

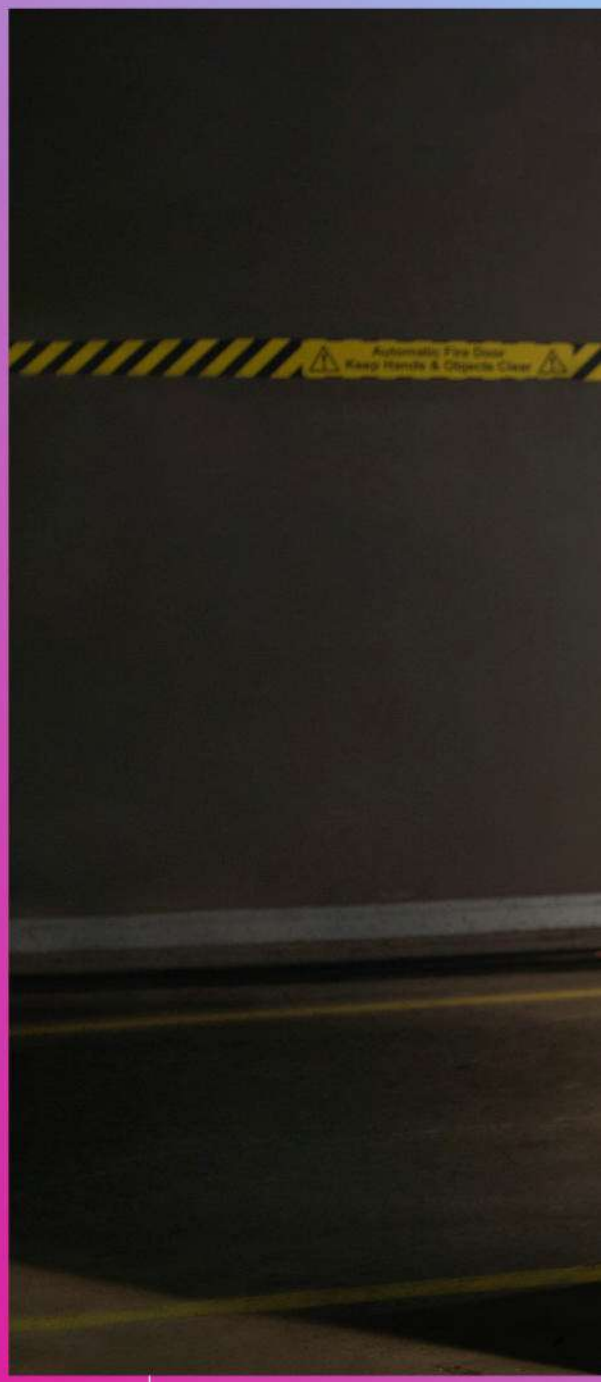
When Johnstone, an affable New Zealander, talks to *Empire*, he's dotting the i's and chatting the GPT's on *M3GAN 2.0*. He's also just returned from a launch party for the film's first trailer, and he's still trying to get his head around it. "It was like Mardi Gras," he smiles. "There was M3GAN on giant heads, there were multiple M3GAN dancers, there were trapeze artists. We were looking around the room going, 'This is insane.' If you try to anticipate something like this every time, you'll be very unhappy."

It's certainly a long way away from where Johnstone thought the first *M3GAN* would end up. "I didn't know the movie would even come out in theatres," he says. "We had a lot of fun along the way, but to be honest, for the longest time I thought I was making a career-ending goofy puppet movie."

Au contraire. The first movie was many things, but "career-ending" and "goofy puppet movie" were not among them. Instead, it was a deliciously tart, blackly comedic horror which saw Williams' Gemma, a genius toy designer who had suddenly found herself the guardian to her orphaned young niece Cady (Violet McGraw), come up with a capital idea to take the parental heat off her. She invented M3GAN (an acronym for Model 3 Generative Android), a cryin', talkin', sleepin', walkin', livin' doll whose primary function was to be Cady's loyal and faithful guide through the grieving process.

When Johnstone says you can't plan for a character to be embraced and held aloft as an icon, let alone instantly, he's not wrong. But with M3GAN, Johnstone and co-writer Akela Cooper were giving themselves every chance. Although she doesn't show up for the first 25 minutes, once M3GAN appears, all sass and sardonic one-liners, it's her movie. "I never thought of it as being iconic," admits Johnstone. "But I thought if we could make a doll that's more realistic than one we'd seen before, that would creep people out. And people just really responded to her. She's bigger than all of us."

At one point in the trailer for *M3GAN 2.0*, a fan of M3GAN — whose exploits seem to have become public knowledge — screams, "I don't care if she did kill four people. She is

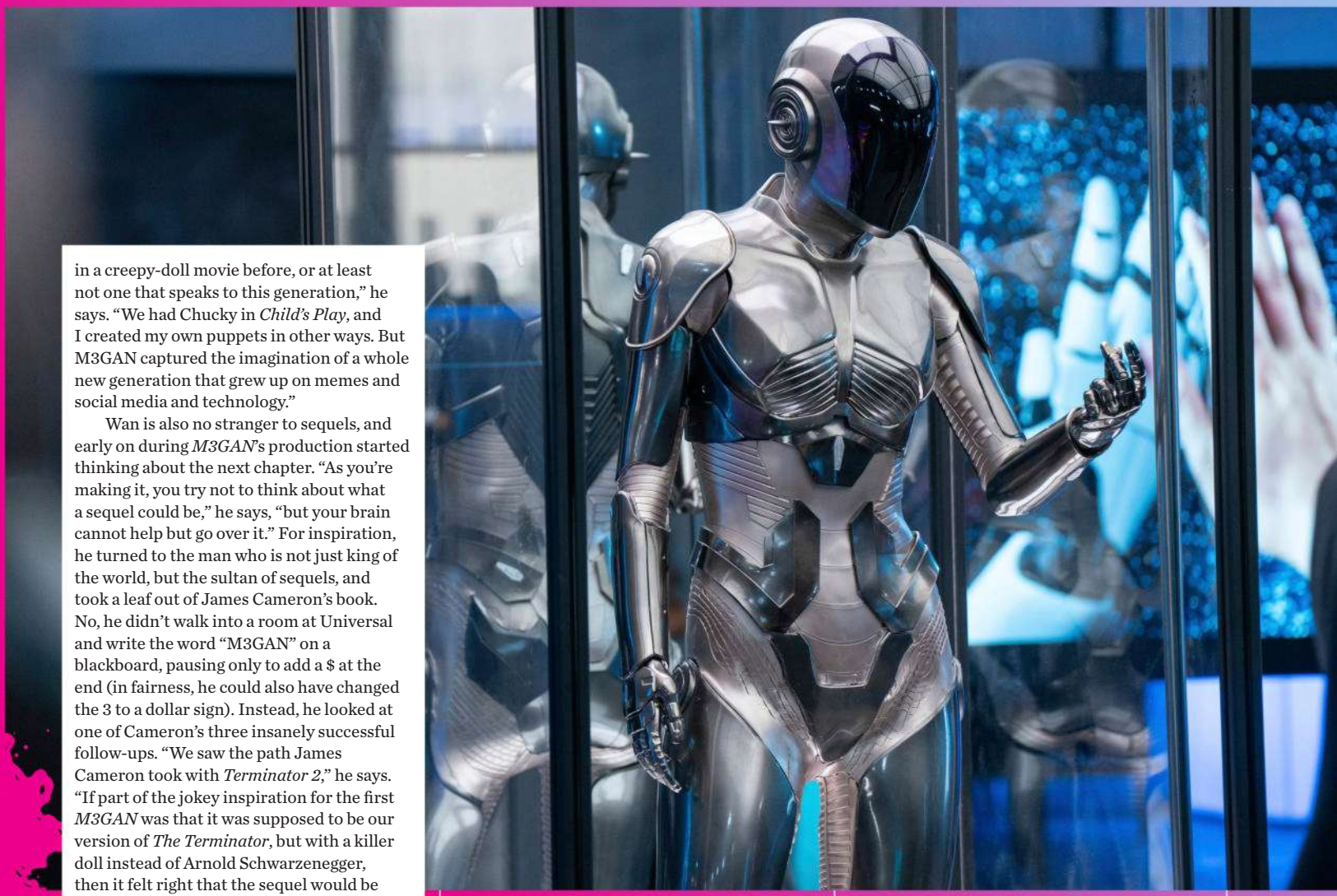


Clockwise from main: Meet the new and improved, upgraded M3GAN; Forever cool and calculating; Armed and ready: Gemma (Allison Williams) and Cady (Violet McGraw); Director Gerard Johnstone on set.

a smoking hot warrior princess!" And that seems to sum up why people embraced M3GAN. Yes, she went on a murder spree, but she did it with style. She wore her outfits with the *élan* of a supermodel. She would routinely burst into song ('Titanium', 'Toy Soldiers', and a Disney-esque ditty of her own creation were all on her playlist). And, before she sliced up the CEO of Gemma's company with a paper cutter, she did a funny little dance. "The dance was just one of those things," shrugs Johnstone. "I gotta get this character from A to B, and it just seemed boring to have her pick up a blade."

Nevertheless, by the end of the film, M3GAN had gone M3GA insane. A brutal bust-up in Gemma's home ended with the doll being switched off for good. But you can't keep a bad robot down forever. "How can we do something that capitalises on people's feelings towards M3GAN and the crazy reaction to the first movie?" muses Johnstone. "A batshit reaction deserves a bonkers sequel."

James Wan knows a thing or two about dolls. Specifically, creepy ones. He's responsible for both Billy, Jigsaw's unsettling mascot in the *Saw* movies, and Annabelle, the possessed poppet who runs amok in the *Conjuring* series. But, as producer of *M3GAN*, Wan knew very early on he might have stumbled upon the queen of them all. "She has something you haven't quite seen ›



in a creepy-doll movie before, or at least not one that speaks to this generation," he says. "We had Chucky in *Child's Play*, and I created my own puppets in other ways. But M3GAN captured the imagination of a whole new generation that grew up on memes and social media and technology."

Wan is also no stranger to sequels, and early on during *M3GAN*'s production started thinking about the next chapter. "As you're making it, you try not to think about what a sequel could be," he says, "but your brain cannot help but go over it." For inspiration, he turned to the man who is not just king of the world, but the sultan of sequels, and took a leaf out of James Cameron's book. No, he didn't walk into a room at Universal and write the word "M3GAN" on a blackboard, pausing only to add a $ at the end (in fairness, he could also have changed the 3 to a dollar sign). Instead, he looked at one of Cameron's three insanely successful follow-ups. "We saw the path James Cameron took with *Terminator 2*," he says. "If part of the jokey inspiration for the first *M3GAN* was that it was supposed to be our version of *The Terminator*, but with a killer doll instead of Arnold Schwarzenegger, then it felt right that the sequel would be *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. We knew that M3GAN had to meet a nemesis potentially more powerful than she is."

Which makes Sakhno's Amelia the T-1000 to M3GAN's T-800. Or, as the trailer puts it, 'This Bitch Vs That Bitch'. Amelia — aka That Bitch — is a robot based on Gemma's designs, which were smuggled out of the toy company Funki by an unscrupulous, now dead, assistant, and snapped up by a defence contractor. Which means she's not a toy, more of a weapon, as she sets off on a mission to kill her creators, which, by logical extension, includes Gemma. "Amelia represents the militarisation of that technology," says Sakhno. "She's caught between her programming and an emerging sense of self-awareness. That's what makes her interesting."

And lethal. Sakhno laughs as she recalls how, on her first day, "I killed a whole bunch of people." It's clear that the intent with Amelia is to try to bottle lightning again, and create a character that could have just as big an impact as M3GAN. "Ivanna is so great," says Johnstone. "She inhabits Amelia with such intensity that you really believe she's a robot. She's not the sassy queen that M3GAN is, for sure. M3GAN 100 per cent owns that space."

In every other way, though, Amelia could well be M3GAN's superior. Quicker, stronger, smarter, campier, cuntier. "She has multiple personalities," reveals Sakhno. "And oh my God, let me tell you, she's serving some looks."

She's a formidable opponent, then. But it may not be enough. Because this new version of M3GAN — M3GAN 2.0, if you will — has a few tricks up her immaculately tailored sleeve.

A wise man once said, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." That wise man was, of course, Jason Statham in *Furious 7* (directed by, of course, James Wan). It's unlikely that The Stath was thinking about sentient super-robots when he said it, but it nutshells the hell out of Gemma's situation in *M3GAN 2.0*. "Amelia is enough of a threat, and terrifying enough that it renders Gemma completely helpless," says Williams. "Our heroes don't have control over [her]. In fact, maybe no-one does."

The central dilemma of *M3GAN 2.0* is so timely it could have been made in Switzerland. The first movie came out just two years ago, when for most of us 'A.I.' was just an abstract concept, or an underappreciated/disappointing (delete as applicable) Spielberg movie. Now, it's everywhere, advancing at an extraordinary/alarming rate (again, delete as applicable). Some just goof around with ChatGPT and rip off Ghibli. Others fear for humanity's future. And that is reflected in the central confrontation of *M3GAN 2.0*. "If M3GAN, to some degree, represents what potentially AI can be," says Wan, "Amelia shows the dark side, and that the rise-of-the-machines movement could be right."

Top to bottom: New bitch on the block: Amelia (Ivanna Sakhno) showcases her robot suit; All dolled up as a cold-hearted killing machine.

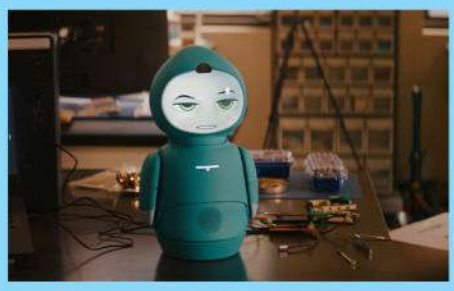
M3GAN — aka This Bitch — was last seen with her face cleaved in twain, her wig torn off, and her CPU smashed beyond even the reach of a two-year John Lewis warranty. But

desperate times call for desperate measures, and Gemma is forced to resurrect M3GAN, hoping that she won't turn on her and Cady, or mankind, while knowing, deep down inside, that she can't trust the deadly doll as far as she can throw her. "She's pretty heavy, actually," laughs Williams. "I don't know how far she could throw her."

In fact, this new iteration of M3GAN is heavier than before, her computerised consciousness uploaded into a new body that, among other things, is taller. "It makes sense," says Johnstone. "Cady, the villain she's facing, is taller." There's another reason, though — while Sakhno is mostly playing Amelia by herself, with the aid of some stunt performers and the odd animatronic stand-in, M3GAN is more of a team effort: part animatronic puppet, part voice-performance (with Jenna Davis on ADR), part physical performer (those honours going to Amie Donald). "We really wanted to bring Amie back, and she keeps growing," notes Johnstone. "But with sequels, you want to make them bigger, better, faster. So it made sense that she was going to be bigger."

It's unlikely, though, that Donald can fly. But this upgraded M3GAN sure can. "You'll believe a robot can fly," laughs Johnstone. "If M3GAN wants to stand at the top of a mountain, with the sun flaring behind her, and wear a squirrel suit and fly through the air for some reason, we've just got to provide the circumstances in which that can happen."

It's all part of Johnstone's approach to the sequel, which saw him assume solo screenplay duties after *M3GAN*'s Akela Cooper worked on the initial draft. He's keen not to repeat himself ("I hate it when movies do that"), and has hence shifted the series into another genre: action, albeit with "freaky scares", he says. "M3GAN's the kind of character that doesn't like labels, and doesn't want to be defined by one genre. So it just felt fitting to segue into this. I hope people dig it, and they're not bummed out that she doesn't start randomly dancing down the corridor. We haven't shoehorned in another sort of guillotine somewhere for her to grab."



Clockwise from top left: Cady on the case; M3GAN housed in a temporary, less deadly body; McGraw and lead puppeteer Adrien Morot with M3GAN on set.

The first film was often hilarious (a cop laughing as he described how a 12-year-old kid had his ear pulled off, and pretty much everything M3GAN said). But the sequel's trailer trumpeted an arch tone, loud and proud. "Hold onto your vaginas," says M3GAN at one point. "That was one of those lines where I was reading the script, and I was like, 'Are we really...? We're really...? We're gonna say this in the movie!'" laughs Williams. "You don't drop that into a trailer just haphazardly, or a movie for that matter, or everyday conversation." And that's just the tip. Iceberg-wise.

"We have a lot of vagina jokes in this movie," admits Johnstone, who had a blast writing for *M3GAN* here. "She's a lot more front and centre. By virtue of having her in more scenes, the film just becomes funnier. I guess I just have to tap into the sassy teenage bitch that's in all of us."

None of this was in the manual for Gemma when she created M3GAN. Victor Frankenstein never had to deal with sass and serious side-eye from his creature. "At least Gemma doesn't have viscera to deal with," says Williams (who counts Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as her favourite book). "At least, not in the first act. I'd take Gemma's job any day."

Williams, as you might imagine, has been giving AI a lot of thought. "We feel entitled to use the parts of it that don't freak us out, that just serve us," she says. "And then as soon as we feel that 'uncanny valley' thing, we want to reject it. This movie's asking us to examine the kind of stewardship we feel like we're ready to have over these beings."

Recently, she embarked upon a little experiment. "I asked ChatGPT a hundred questions a day," she says. "I said, 'Based on what I've asked you, what do you think you know about me?' It was humbling. It was like, 'You have a toddler, you're constantly worried about ailments, you seem to live somewhere where it's green.'" Thankfully, it didn't have anything more specific. "It had no idea what I do for a living," she says. Then she laughs. "I still haven't told ChatGPT that I know M3GAN. I think I'm gonna keep that information from them for a little while longer."

Probably for the best.

M3GAN 2.0 IS IN CINEMAS FROM 27 JUNE

MEAN MACHINES

CINEMA'S BIGGEST METAL DOUCHEBAGS

HAL 9000
2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY 1968

The original AI-hole. When catty computer HAL isn't murdering his passengers, he's patronising them in an infuriatingly calm pass-agg tone. Having killed his crewmates, he even has the nerve to tell Dr Bowman, "I honestly think you ought to sit down calmly, take a stress-pill and think things over." Insufferable.

THE GUNSLINGER
WESTWORLD 1973

Effectively programmed to irritate people into violence, Yul Brynner's pistol-toting robo-wrong'un hangs around the Westworld saloon wearing a ten-gallon hat and a smirk, spilling punters' pints until they challenge him to a duel. He becomes significantly *more* douchey when he goes rogue and starts actively killing paying customers.

THE FEMBOTS
AUSTIN POWERS: INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY 1997

A futuristic twist on the sirens from Homer's *Odyssey*, these seductive cyborgs lure men in with their shiny miniskirts and beehive hairdos, before riddling them with bullets from their machine-gun nipples. They are merciless murder-machines that cannot be stopped — except by the sight of excessive chest-hair or Union Jack underpants.

GENERAL GRIEVOUS
STAR WARS: EPISODE III — REVENGE OF THE SITH 2005

This dyspneic droid's dickishness is evident from his first scene, when he fails to thank an underling who hands him Obi-Wan's lightsaber ("You're welcome," mutters the subordinate). A constant chesty cough would put anyone in a foul mood — particularly if they didn't have lungs — but Grievous takes it too far. He's a bold one — and a *total* prick.

TOM ELLEN

EMPIRE

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DIFFERENT CLASS

STARRING

Sydney Sweeney

SHE'S AN A-LIST ACTOR WITH OLD HOLLYWOOD CHARM, BUT LIKES NOTHING MORE THAN GETTING *REAL*. WITH GRITTY DRAMA ECHO VALLEY ON THE WAY, SHE TELLS US WHY SHE LOVES SUBVERTING EXPECTATIONS

Words
REBECCA NICHOLSON

Portraits
ART STREIBER

Sydney Sweeney, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 6 March 2025.

SYDNEY SWEENEY VEERS BETWEEN worlds. To her 25 million followers on Instagram, she's a glamorous, polished, pin-up type, and there's something of the old-school, old-fashioned movie star about her public image. She leaned into that in the first season of *The White Lotus*, as the acidic pool-lounger Olivia; warred with and, duh, fell for, Glen Powell's beefcake in crowd-pleasing romcom *Anyone But You*; and played a youthful superhero-in-waiting in *Madame Web*. Look at it from one angle, and she's the essence of the trad leading lady. But for the most part, her work tells a different story.

The 27-year-old rose to fame as the naive, fragile Cassie in HBO's *Euphoria*, in which her character is — deep breath — pressured into having an abortion, has a messy affair with her best friend's abusive boyfriend, and eventually collapses into a chaotic, much-memed bathroom meltdown — while dressed like she's in the musical *Oklahoma!*. And Cassie's demons and dark side set a template for what was to come. As Sweeney's film career began to take off, she played a Manson girl in *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*, starred as a real-life whistleblower interrogated by the FBI in stressful drama *Reality*, and as a producer, worked for ten years to ensure that *Immaculate*, in which she plays a novice nun impregnated with the spawn of Satan by evil priests, got made. Now, in new film *Echo Valley*, she embraces the grit again as the troubled drug-addict Claire, who brings all sorts of pain to her mother's (Julianne Moore) door. Clearly, Sweeney seems to relish roles that require as little vanity as possible.

She calls *Empire* during a rare break from filming *Euphoria*'s long-delayed third season. She is self-aware, a little guarded, clearly smart. And even returning to her breakout role, she's an actor who needs to be continually challenged — she tells us — on every level...

What are you doing in Europe right now? Has *Euphoria* decamped to another continent?
No — I am filming *Euphoria* right now, but I had a little bit of time off. I'm shooting a beauty campaign in Barcelona.

That world of glamour is a million miles away from Claire, your character in *Echo Valley*. She's struggling with addiction, which leads her down some dark roads. There is plenty of shouting and crying and angst. When shoots are over, are you able to leave it all at work?
I am. I love to be able to jump fully into these characters and go mad, almost, in the scenes, but if I took that home, that definitely would not be a fun dynamic for my friends and family. I don't ever put any of my own personal thoughts or memories or feelings into a character. I was taught that by my friend Kodi Smit-McPhee's dad, Andy (*an acting coach*). He taught it to me as a way of just making sure that I can have a healthy, balanced life, and being able to know who Sydney is as a person, and then also be able to know who my characters are.

You say you love to go mad...
I mean, it's an emotional release, for sure. It's definitely a very big emotional release.

Julianne Moore plays your mother. Were you a fan of her work before?
Oh, I am obsessed with Julianne Moore. When I found out I was going to do a movie with her... I keep being like, "Oh my gosh, I'm ticking off all these big bucket-list items in my career." I really hope my thirties can live up to my twenties!

Your scenes together are so intense. There's one in particular...
You have to be able to go to those places, because they can be scary. I just let whatever happens with the character happen. I never know what's going to come out. I don't know how I'm going to perform a scene. I don't plan it.

It strikes me that there are two sides to your work. There's the ultra-glossy, high-glamour side, and then there's the all-in, immersive, pulling-out-your-fingernails side. Do you enjoy rolling your sleeves up, and vomiting up your teeth, for example, as you do in *Immaculate*?
I love the stuff that's so extremely far from who I am. I think that's why, if you look at it like that, there are two very extreme versions of the characters I play. Like, the glossy or the crazy. But I hope I fall somewhere in the middle. (*Laughs*)

You can see the pattern in your early major TV roles. In 2018, you were the high-school hot girl in *Everything Sucks*, and then in the same year, you played a psychiatric patient in *Sharp Objects*.
I actually filmed those two shows at the same time. And then I filmed *The Handmaid's Tale*, and then the pilot of *Euphoria*. It was a crazy year. But it was also an incredible year, because it was everything that I'd always dreamt of and worked for. These characters that I always hoped I'd be able to audition for one day, they were all coming to life. These incredible women were complex and multi-faceted and they were deep. It was a dream, honestly.

***Euphoria* feels like the glamour and the horror, bundled up in one role. What is it like to return to Cassie after three years?**
I have such a spot in my heart for Cassie, and I hold her really close and dear. She is crazy. She makes so many mistakes. She's flawed on so many levels, but she does it all from a place of love. It could be a sad version of love, as well. It's so much fun to play a character that is as crazy as she is. Sam [Levinson] is such a brilliant filmmaker to work with, because I'll read something, then I'll call him, and I'm like, "Let's go *crazier*." And he's like, "I'm all in." And this season is *unhinged*.

***More* unhinged?**
(*Laughs*) Yes. ›

As Claire, opposite Julianne Moore's Kate, in the upcoming *Echo Valley*.

Previous page: Dress: Alberta Ferretti.
This page: Dress: Georges Chakra; Shoes: vintage

Playing Cassie in *Euphoria* has been huge for you, and changed your life. Do you think it fixed an idea of who you are in the public eye?
It definitely changed my life, yeah. I think that with the amount of access, with social media, and how much content gets put out there of Cassie... People do have a hard time separating actors from their characters, and especially someone like Cassie, where she is hated and she's loved, but she's definitely a complicated character. And so I think that that could confuse people, for sure. But if they're hating me for decisions that my character is making, then I'm playing the character correctly.

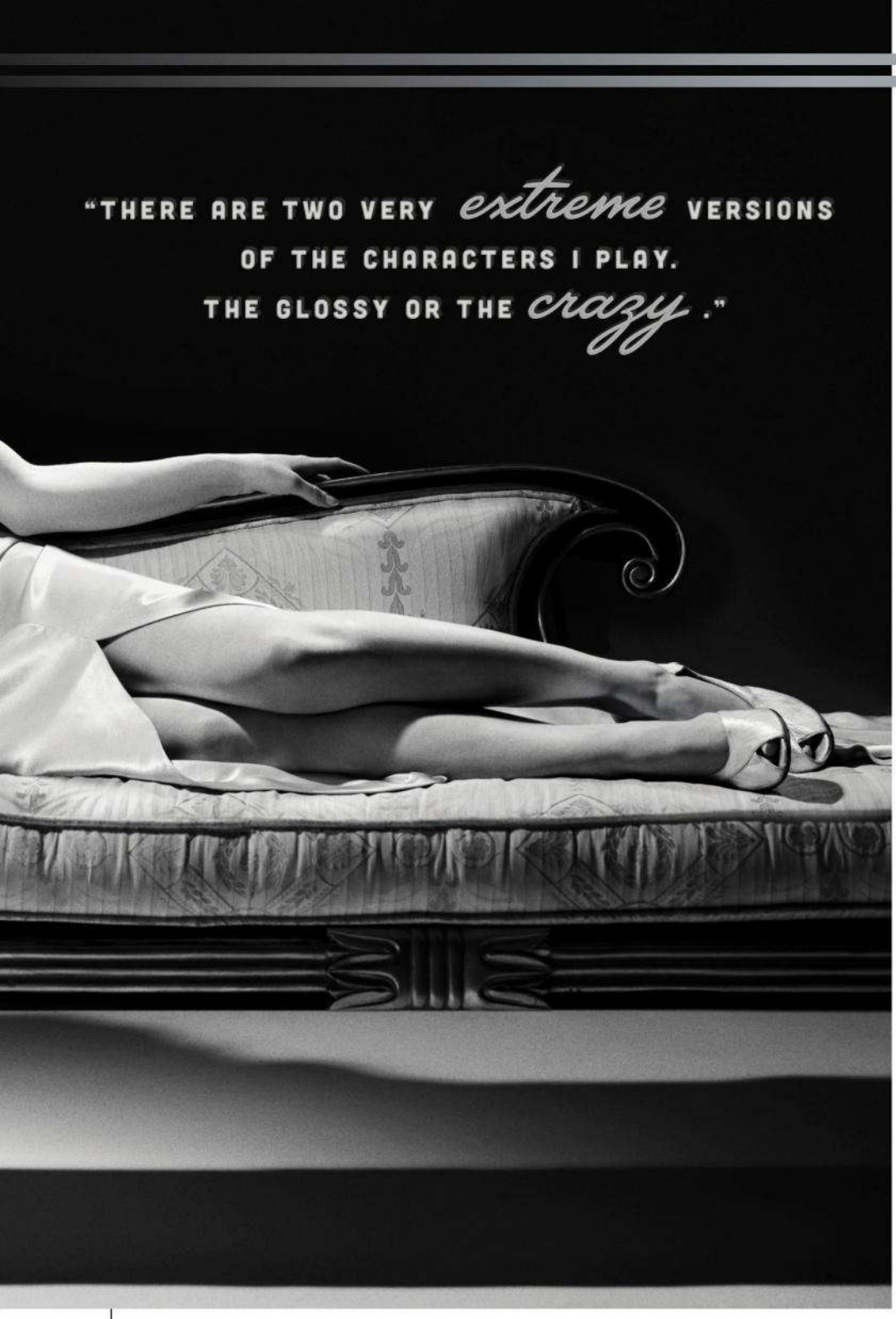
That's a very even-handed interpretation of it.
I think because I've loved acting since such a young age, and I always dreamed of playing characters that I've been so lucky to be able to play, I knew it wasn't gonna be all easy. And yeah, you learn. I was 20, filming the pilot of *Euphoria*, and 21 when it came out. So it was a whirlwind at a really young age. You have to roll with the punches and grow and learn and adapt.

At the same time as that first season of *Euphoria*, you played Snake, a Manson acolyte, in *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*. What it was like to be directed by Quentin Tarantino?
I mean, talk about another bucket-list item I did not think was going to be happening. I spent my 21st birthday on that set. He had a no-phone rule, so everyone just ran around that world, and was present with each other. He's so fascinating to watch and listen to. He tells so many stories. You feel like you're a part of what you imagine Hollywood would be.

Did you get stuck into the history of that whole scene?
I love research, so I tried to learn as much as I possibly could. I read a lot. I scrapbooked some stuff. With Snake, she actually had a book that you can read about her. There was a lot of material to go off.

In *Reality*, you played a real-life person too, the whistleblower Reality Winner. That was a pivotal role for you, in that it let people know that you could do something very different.
I love to find characters and projects that are completely, vastly different from one another. I had just finished *Euphoria*, and usually, once a project comes out, you get sent a bunch of scripts that are exactly like that character, or the tone of that project. I kept reading all these things. I was like, "No, I don't want to do that again," because I knew they were coming back to Cassie. My agent sent me *Reality* and said, "Read this," and I read it, and I was absolutely terrified, because I knew it was going to be a huge challenge. Usually when something

Dress and shoes: vintage



Bottom, left to right: As the troubled Cassie Howard in *Euphoria* (2019-); Having a bloody nightmare in *Immaculate* (2024).

scares me or it presents itself as a challenge, I know I have to go after it. And so I put myself on tape and auditioned for it, because they didn't think I was going to be right for it.

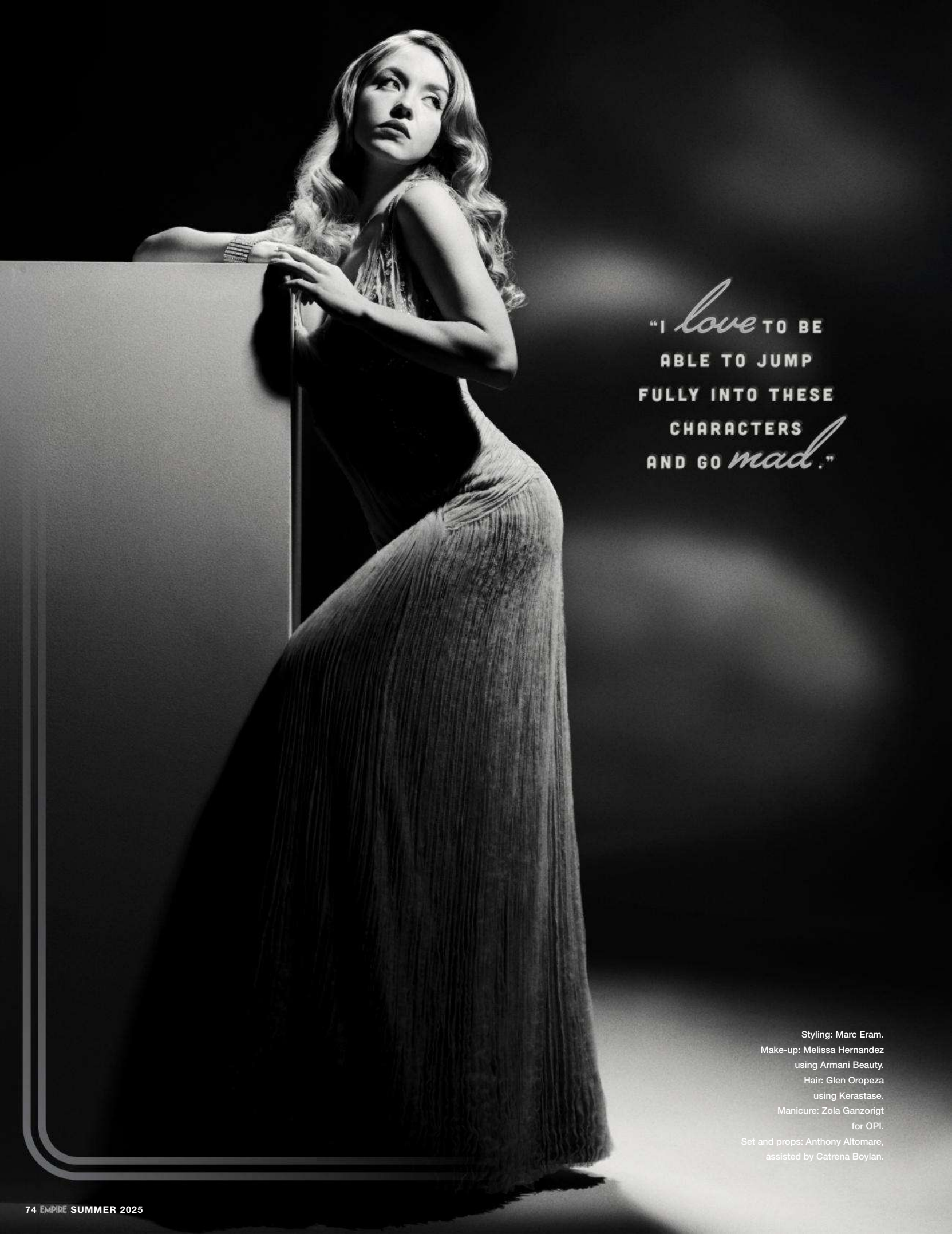
Why did they think you weren't going to be right?
I mean, if you watch Cassie, you're not going to think Cassie is going to play Reality. I like the projects where I have to prove people wrong. I ended up getting it, and we filmed it in 16 days. It was a very gruelling process, but I'm so incredibly proud of that film.

What terrified you about it?
Just how different a character she was. There's so much dialogue, and it's not just dialogue, it's an actual transcript from the interrogation, and that holds a lot of weight. Her mind is racing and thinking a million things so quickly, and she has to be so present and try and navigate in a situation that's unfolding in front of her. It was a lot to wrap your head around.

***Madame Web* seems the opposite to that, in almost every way. How was your experience of that superhero, blockbuster universe?**
It's always fun to be able to be a part of something that's bigger than yourself. I hadn't done a studio film yet, and I had started my production company [Fifty-Fifty Films]. I had some properties that I really wanted to be able to take out to studios, and I needed to be able to get my name to have more value, within a studio household. Doing a project like that really helps you on in the market. I also wanted to be able to do something that my cousins can watch. I have a bunch of little teenage cousins, and they don't really understand what I do. I thought it would be so cool to be able to do something that they'd actually think was fun and cool.

I think we can be candid about the fact that it didn't do so well...
I mean, I had a really fun time, so that is all that matters to me. I think that if you are enjoying what you do, it doesn't really matter what the outcome is, on a box-office level. Of course, you want the film to be celebrated and loved and successful, because then everyone succeeds.

As you say, you wanted to make a bigger name for yourself so you could get your own movies made. What appeals to you about being behind the camera?
This industry is so fascinating. There are so many chats, pieces and moves to make, and I find that really exhilarating. It's constantly changing. I love acting, but being able to step outside of that and then see how everything comes together, and understand what every crew member needs and what it takes to get a project from imagination to conception... When people see it in the theatres or on screen, it's been a really long, hard process, but I love it. ›



Styling: Marc Eram.
Make-up: Melissa Hernandez using Armani Beauty.
Hair: Glen Oropeza using Kerastase.
Manicure: Zola Ganzorigt for OPI.
Set and props: Anthony Altomare, assisted by Catrena Boylan.

You produced *Anyone But You*, which was not critically adored, but was a massive sleeper hit. Why do you think there was that disconnect between critics and audience?
There are movies you do for the critics and there are movies that you do for an audience. Take *Reality*. *Reality* is for the critics, and *Anyone But You* is for an audience.

You knew it was for the audience when you were making it?
100 per cent. 1,000 per cent. Critics all have their own opinions, and you can't just try and make critics happy, because you're not thinking about everybody else. It's a different process and a different experience.

Will there be a sequel?
(*Laughs*) Ummmmm! You'll just have to wait and see. It's not a no, and it's not a yes. It's a, "I don't have an answer that I can say for you."

Are you a romcom fan?
I grew up loving romcoms. I am a hopeless romantic, so I love those kinds of films. *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *13 Going On 30*, *Crazy Stupid Love*, *50 First Dates*, *When Harry Met Sally...*

What's next, on the production front?
I've got all sorts of stuff that we just finished. 'Christy Martin' (*an as-yet untitled biopic of the pioneering female boxer*), which I'm really, really proud of, and very excited for people to see. I produced *The Housemaid* (*a Paul Feig-directed adaptation of a bestselling thriller*), with Amanda Seyfried and Brandon Sklenar. I am producing *Scandalous!*, which Colman Domingo will be directing (*about the love affair between Sammy Davis Jr. and Kim Novak, who will be played by Sweeney*). And a few others that I can't talk about.

You sound busy!
I thrive in chaos. I love working. I love having to juggle multiple things at the same time. I don't really sleep much, but I do best when I don't sleep much.

You also produced *Immaculate*. You worked for a long time to get that film made.
I auditioned for it when I was 16, and they never made the movie. And I just never stopped thinking about it, and I really wanted to see if I could bring it to life. I took the script out to financiers, and hired our director Michael Mohan, who I had worked with before on *Everything Sucks* and *The Voyeurs*. My biggest fear was hiring a director that would take it from me, and I'd feel like I lost my baby and I didn't have any creative say. That because it was my first film that I was producing, they wouldn't want to listen to me and wouldn't trust me. But because I had such a great relationship with Michael, I knew that he'd be by my side and I'd be by his side. And it was exactly that, the entire time. It showed me that I really wanted to be involved in the entire process. Being able to jump from that into *Anyone But You*, which was such a different scale, a bigger studio film, and definitely not as dark, I got to kind of see both sides of filmmaking. I learned a lot, really fast.

Clockwise from top left: In *The White Lotus* Season 1 (2021); As burgeoning Spider-Woman Julia Cornwall in *Madame Web* (2024); Snake in *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* (2019); *Anyone But You* (2023); *Reality* (2023); TV miniseries *Sharp Objects* (2018).

You'd done horror before. What was it about this particular story that held you in its grip for so long?
I loved my experience on *The Handmaid's Tale* (*Sweeney played child bride Eden, a devout yet naive follower of the authoritarian regime*). I love characters that you question. Like, how can you be so devoted to something that scares you? You don't know the truth behind it, and in *Immaculate*, there's so much that you question. Then, of course, the ending. The ending, it's just kind of there, you know?

It is quite the ending.
You kind of do the whole movie for the ending, and I could never get the ending (*in which Sweeney's Cecilia is covered in blood, in a very gory conclusion*) out of my mind. I love playing characters that are super-raw and vulnerable. I prefer to wear no make-up on screen. In *Immaculate*, *Eden*, *Echo Valley*, *Reality*, all those films, I didn't wear any make-up, and I loved it. I don't like putting on concealer or foundation or anything like that when I don't have to.

That's another example of how you might surprise people.
It's because everybody just thinks of Cassie. She's just such a pop-culture-type character, that's in the zeitgeist of the world, and so that's everybody's first impression or thought when they think of me. But in reality, when you think of all the other projects that I've done in the last few years, none of them are like Cassie in any way.

You're meant to be starring in a remake of *Barbarella*, which was announced back in 2022. What's the latest news on that?
I was just in London and had a meeting to discuss the story and the script. I can't say too much, but it's really going to come together in a very, very fun and big way. It's a long process. I don't think people realise how long some things can take, but it's gonna be worth the wait.

Is *Barbarella* another item on your bucket list?
Yes, it is. (*Laughs*) That's what I'm saying! My thirties, I've really got to step it up!

ECHO VALLEY IS ON APPLE TV+ AND IN SELECT CINEMAS FROM 13 JUNE

Dress: Alberta Ferretti; Bracelet: vintage Christian Dior. Additional imagery: Alamy, Apple TV+, Neon

THE MASTER OF MAYHEM

WORDS
SAB ASTLEY

JAN DE BONT WAS THE WILD MAN OF ACTION FILMMAKING, ALWAYS IN THE EYE OF THE STORM, ALWAYS LEAVING A GLORIOUS TRAIL OF DESTRUCTION. WE TALK TO HIM ABOUT THREE DECADES OF UNRESTRAINED CINEMATIC THRILL-SEEKING

Jan de Bont — beside the camera, headphones on — on the burning set of *Speed*.

JAN DE BONT

was in a hole in the ground, filming 1981 animal-adventure comedy *Roar*, when a lioness, deciding to improvise, leapt onto him. She trapped de Bont's skull in her mouth and scalped him. "The thing that bothered me most was the sound of the lioness' teeth scraping against my skull as she bit my head," he remembers. "It was like hearing it in full stereo, and I kept hearing the sound every night. For a long, long time." But having rested in hospital after a 200-stitch operation, the cinematographer went right back to set. "The only way to address what happened was to go back and confront that memory," he says. "And that goddamn lion."

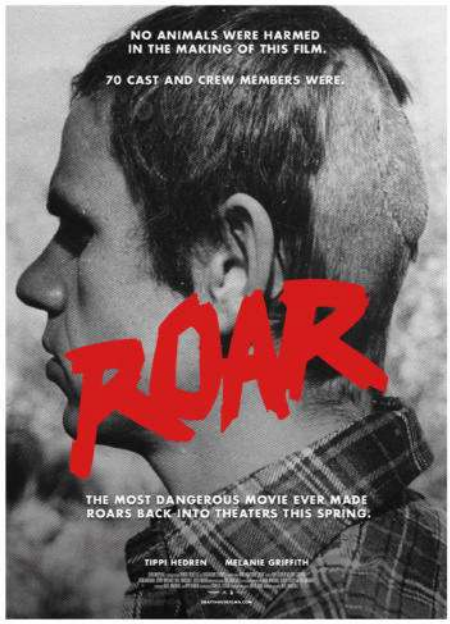
It was a dangerous set. There were over 150 untamed lions, tigers and elephants, and multiple crew were being injured daily by the animals. Actor-director Noel Marshall contracted blood poisoning and gangrene several times from his lion-inflicted injuries, a young Melanie Griffith nearly lost an eye after an attack, and an elephant fractured Tippi Hedren's ankle after throwing her into the air with its trunk. Looking back, de Bont concedes there may have been some red flags. "It's a pretty horrifying thing to realise you are effectively prey for everything around you," he tells *Empire*. "I should've stopped right on the first day."

But he didn't. That was never his style, even from the start of his Hollywood career: *Roar* was the first project de Bont landed after moving to Los Angeles, and would introduce him as a filmmaker with an unwavering dedication to capturing something *real* through his wild-and-close handheld camerawork, as well as a commitment to elaborate, ambitious in-camera effects, often placing himself in harm's way to do so. De Bont did not merely control the camera; he embodied it.

As a cinematographer, de Bont lensed over 40 films. He directed five, including *Speed* and *Twister*, fusing a documentary-style closeness with an adrenaline-injected handheld intensity. Whether it was slicing Ford Pintos in half for *Cujo*, installing thousands of microscopic LEDs to light a submarine in *The Hunt For Red October*, or creating makeshift elevators to capture a single shot in *Basic Instinct*, his inventive craftsmanship, combined with a fierce dedication to the smallest of details, were integral to some of the most iconic sequences of the '80s and '90s.

The 81-year-old speaks to *Empire* from his Los Angeles home, his relaxed demeanour contrasted by the lively energy with which, over three hours, he recounts stories from the past, grinning through almost all of them. His eyes light up as he remembers things mid-anecdote. His extensive photography collection decorates the walls, and he loves the classical stylings of Dutch painter Rembrandt as much as the Toho *Godzilla* movies, citing 1961's *Mothra* and 2023's *Godzilla Minus One* as his favourites. "You can

Main: Action man: Jan de Bont, in his cinematographer days, gets up close with Bruce Willis for *Die Hard* (1988). **Below, top to bottom:** Real-life mother and daughter Tippi Hedren and Melanie Griffith dice with danger in *Roar* (1981); Rabid dog vs. Ford Pinto in *Cujo* (1983); "What are you gonna do? Arrest me for smoking?" Things heat up in *Basic Instinct* (1992), which de Bont lensed for Paul Verhoeven.


NO ANIMALS WERE HARMED
IN THE MAKING OF THIS FILM.
70 CAST AND CREW MEMBERS WERE.
ROAR
THE MOST DANGEROUS MOVIE EVER MADE
ROARS BACK INTO THEATERS THIS SPRING.
TIPPI HEDREN
MELANIE GRIFFITH

Above: De Bont shares a laugh with Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock while taking a break from wreaking havoc on *Speed*. **Below, clockwise from top:** Jack Traven (Reeves) and Annie (Bullock) are in the fast lane; *Die Hard*'s FBI helicopter-crash climax; Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's *Speed*'s flying number 2525 bus; De Bont's own scalped head makes the poster for *Roar*.

see that movie was made with so much pleasure," he says of the latter. "They really believed in what they were making." Just as he did.

De Bont has come a long way from his Netherlands beginnings, creating little documentaries on his 8mm camera aged 12 years old, as part of a film club at his school. It was Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* that transformed his interest into a passion, with de Bont travelling all the way to London as a 24-year-old just to see it on its opening weekend in May 1968. "The moving image was what really interested me — how you could change that, improve it," he remembers. "And *2001* shows one of the best directors doing that."

Enrolling in the Netherlands Film Academy's inaugural year, he met burgeoning director Wim van der Linden, joining forces post-graduation to film live concerts for the likes of The Rolling Stones, Neil Young, The Beatles and The Who. And there at the Netherlands Film Academy, he had also become friends with Paul Verhoeven. "Paul studied mathematics, but like me, he was also obsessed with film," he recalls. "He used to always say to me, 'Let's make a movie.'" And in 1971, they finally did, with the 20-minute short *The Wrestler*, with de Bont as cinematographer. But it was their adaptation of provocative Dutch bestselling novel *Turkish Delight* that would cement their collaboration.

Filmed in 1972, it was the duo's second feature after Verhoeven's debut *Business Is Business*, and starred Rutger Hauer (in his screen debut) and Monique van de Ven. A bluntly raw exploration of an artist's sexual and emotional relationship with his young muse, it's still cited as one of the most successful films in the history of Dutch cinema, with over a quarter of the country's population reported to have seen it in 1973. It blazed through Europe, outplaying *Love Story*, *Cabaret* and *Last Tango In Paris* at Italian cinemas. And central to its modern aesthetic is de Bont's frenetic handheld camera, shooting the couple documentary-style — a creative decision he had to convince Verhoeven would be the key to *Turkish Delight*'s authenticity. "The thing is, when we have these disagreements, I'm never going against Paul," he laughs. "I know what he wants — it's ›

just sometimes I know what Paul wants before he does!" *Turkish Delight* also showcased de Bont's 190-bpm cinematographic style: watching Rutger Hauer pedalling away on his six-speed feels as dynamic as Keanu Reeves' Jack Traven blazing down the 105 Freeway in *Speed*.

De Bont and Verhoeven continued a streak of novel-to-screen adaptations, including 1975 period-drama *Katie Tippel* and 1983 psychosexual thriller *The Fourth Man*. And then came *Flesh And Blood*, an unflinching portrayal of the 16th century's amorality and decadence. It is also the most upsetting filmmaking experience Paul Verhoeven ever had ("The worst shoot of my life," he recalled on the DVD commentary). And he wasn't alone.

"It was an absolutely miserable movie to make," says de Bont. The weather was so cold that it turned the artificial rain into snow, and the crew were consumed in carcinogenic fumes from the hundreds of rubber tyres burned to create battle smoke ("There were flakes of rubber in mouths, our eyes, our hair"). Hauer, meanwhile, unhappy with having to play a morally reprehensible villain, fell out with Verhoeven. But the director taught de Bont an invaluable lesson: you don't quit just because things get difficult. "Paul tried really hard on that movie — he's somebody who doesn't give up," says de Bont. It's a lesson that he took to heart — and to Hollywood.

Clockwise from main: Bill Harding (Bill Paxton) and Dr Jo Harding (Helen Hunt) take shelter in *Twister* (1996); Crafting more wind-based destruction; Reluctant rogue Rutger Hauer in 1985's *Flesh And Blood*; Annie and Officer Alex Shaw (Jason Patric) struggle to take flight in *Speed 2: Cruise Control* (1997); De Bont with Lili Taylor on set of *The Haunting* (1999); Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft in de Bont's final film — to date — as director: *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider — The Cradle Of Life* (2003).

De Bont's kinetic camerawork, alongside his talent for thrusting audiences into even the most unlikely spaces, was electrifying. That was how, in Lewis Teague's 1983 horror *Cujo*, he turned a cute-and-cuddly dog into a snarling, horrifying beast that truly seemed like it wanted to devour Dee Wallace and Danny Pintauro in their tiny Ford Pinto. "You have to get the camera angles where people don't want to be — right near his mouth or his claw," de Bont explains.

This daredevil desire for authenticity is why John McTiernan chose de Bont for *Die Hard*. McTiernan had established himself as a man-of-action with 1987's *Predator*, but the 1988 tumble-atop-the-tower blockbuster would launch him, de Bont and Bruce Willis all to a new level. McTiernan saw something in de Bont's work with Verhoeven that could redefine the Hollywood action film, and the pair workshopped scenes daily in the car-ride over to Century City's Fox Plaza. De Bont convinced McTiernan to shoot almost fully on location, and to incorporate handheld filmmaking into many of the action sequences. "I'm at my best when I have a lot of freedom, and John really gave me that," he says.

Go big or go home was *Die Hard*'s MO. The elevator-shaft explosion, where one-man-army John McClane essentially vaporises two RPG-wielding goons by dropping a C4-packed computer-monitor ten storeys, blew out every window on its floor. For the chopper roof-explosion sequence, half a year of prep resulted in 24 cameras simultaneously filming, with only one take allowed by the city of LA. "The neighbourhood thought that a war had essentially broken out!" laughs de Bont.

His chutzpah has always been his secret weapon. *The Hunt For Red October*'s Marko Ramius would have had a very out-of-character hairstyle after Connery essentially issued a mandate demanding he keep his ponytail, despite director McTiernan's protests — if not for de Bont pointing out its similarity to a limp, swinging dick. "Whenever I saw his ponytail, I started laughing. That's not a good sign!" he says. Never afraid to speak his mind, such qualities allowed a first-time director to walk into a boardroom, tell executives he wanted to supersize the production, pitch two entirely new sequences in the room — and secure the job. With 1994's *Speed*, de Bont's well-over-50-mph directorial debut, he was starting off with the foot fully on the gas pedal.

Originally titled 'Minimum Speed', screenwriter Graham Yost's script would soon change a *lot*. As Fox struggled to find a director, talent agent David Gersh and John McTiernan both recommended de Bont, who had been itching to direct for a long time, and saw *Speed* as his chance to again revitalise the genre. "To me, action movies had been trapped in a time warp," he says. In a meeting, he told them 'Minimum Speed' was missing something big. "What?" they asked. De Bont then pitched them the entire, iconic unfinished-freeway-jump scene there in the room, acting out the high-octane stunt as stunned execs gasped over their coffees. The job was his.

At first, Keanu Reeves wasn't interested in playing unwitting LAPD cop Jack Traven, but de Bont convinced him to get on board. The director also fought for Sandra Bullock, continually chemistry-testing her with Reeves while the studio attempted to book other potential co-stars, and convinced Hopper to join too — they knew each other, sharing a hobby for art-collecting.

On the first day of shooting, everyone was on the highway ready for action — except, that is, for the lead. De Bont recalls hearing from a driver sent to pick up Keanu that he was MIA from his home. "The producer and first AD started to get worried," he remembers now. "Even I was a bit worried — but then, in the distance, we saw this motorcycle racing towards us down the highway,

Alamy, Imago, Mary Evans, MPTV, Photofest

and it just came to a cool stop in front of us. There he was, in costume, ready." Reeves then dismounted his motorcycle and recited a monologue from *Hamlet*. "For our action hero, it was pretty cool."

On set, it was business as usual for de Bont. After the sequence in which Hopper's megalomaniac Howard Payne explodes a bus, the Santa Monica district stopped allowing crews to shoot in the area, because the bus' fumes smoked out an ad-agency building. And after the bus landed on several cameras post-freeway jump, Panavision gave de Bont a plaque for 'Most Cameras Taken Out On A Shot'. "Panavision started providing us with the lenses they found in the basement after that," says de Bont. One day, when the crew ran out of said lenses, the city was suffering a typical traffic gridlock, meaning it would take hours to get new ones. The solution? Go over the city, instead of through it. First assistant cameraman Vern Nobles Jr happened to have a pilot's licence, and literally landed his plane onto the Tarmac of Freeway 105. "Only when you have an empty freeway available can one do such a thing!" laughs de Bont.

The director got in on the action too, agreeing to act as the stunt dummy at times, performing feats first himself to prove they weren't dangerous. It inspired Reeves, who initially had been wary of the task ahead, to do hair-raising stuff himself, including getting under the bus.

Appropriately, *Speed* was a runaway success, with its $350 million box office solidifying it as the eighth-highest-grossing film of 1994. All of this caught the eye of Steven Spielberg, who offered him a storm-chaser actioner he was exec-producing: *Twister*. De Bont continued to bring his love of practical in-camera effects and in-your-face intensity to *Twister*, a fact which some cast appreciated more than others: de Bont especially found a kindred spirit in Bill Paxton, playing his back-in-action storm-chaser with a daredevil glee. "What you see of Bill in the movie is how he was in real life," says de Bont. "It's types like Bill that make movies more real and exciting." And *Twister*'s stunts are de Bont at his wildest — dropping combine harvesters and tractors out of the sky via a military-grade helicopter while making Helen Hunt and Paxton drive through a real, 60-ton, two-storey-tall house at the same time.

Much of de Bont's work contains valentines to Stanley Kubrick: he used some of the same lenses Kubrick used on *Barry Lyndon* for *Die Hard*, and a cinema marquee in *Speed* advertises *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He was stoked, then, when he personally approached Kubrick for permission to use *The Shining* for a drive-in scene in *Twister*, and Kubrick told him he could, and that he loved *Speed*. "I was so happy to hear that," beams de Bont.

From there, his career took something of a left-turn. Contractual obligations forced his hand into taking on underwhelming sequel *Speed 2: Cruise Control*, starring Jason Patric. "The one big problem was when Keanu was committed to other projects," de Bont laments. "The media saw this as a bad sign, and treated the movie's opening as such."

1999's *The Haunting* was a financial success but spooked the critics. And de Bont's final outing would be 2003's *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider — The Cradle Of Life*, which he says endured sudden budget slashes and studio micromanagement. "I came very late to the project basically to get it made," he says. "The producers were very stuck in their ways, which made everything from casting the male lead all the way down to them commenting on [shirt] buttons very difficult."

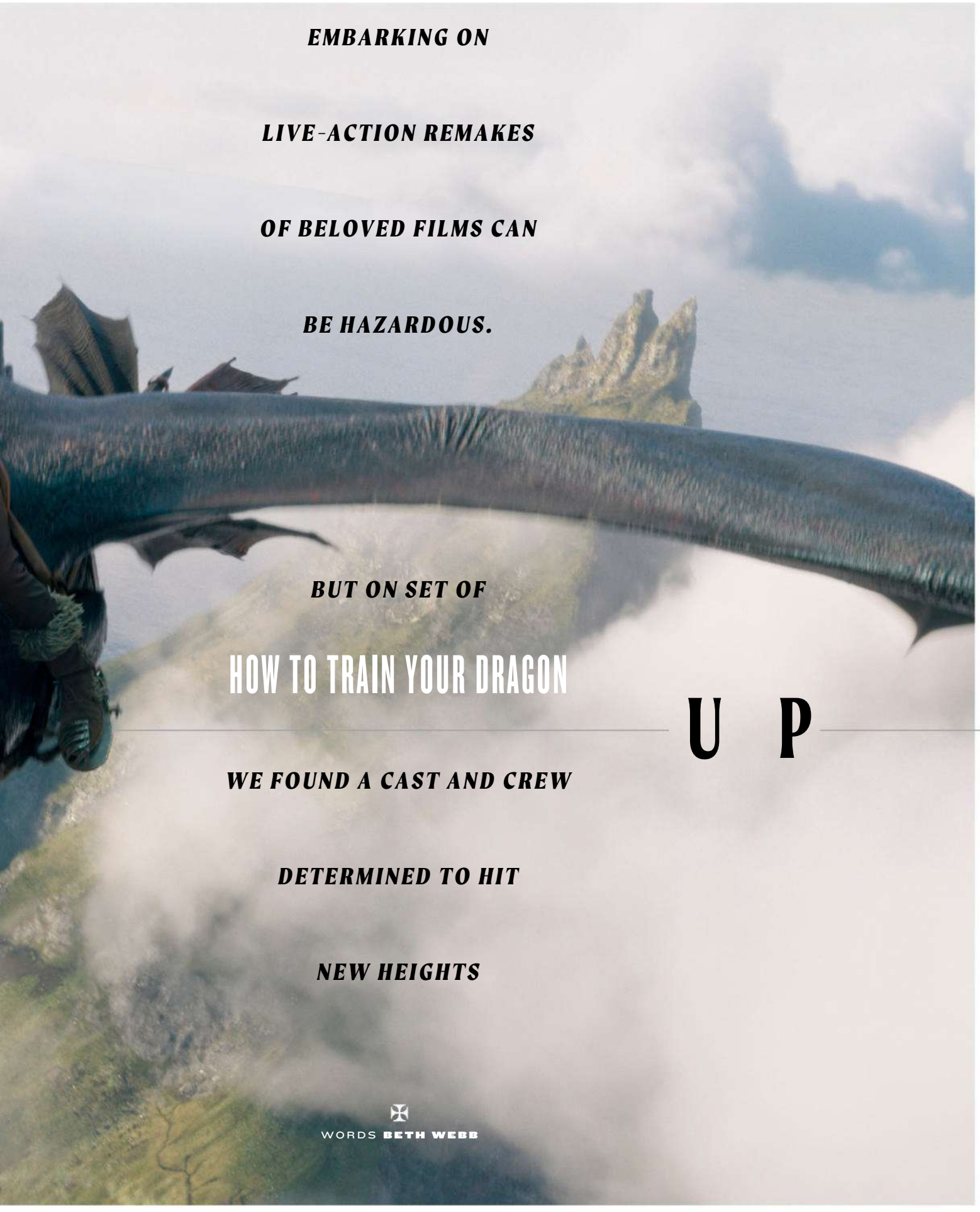
After that, he worked on John Cusack racing-drama 'Stopping Power', but beset by financing difficulties, the film fell through. And then, Jan de Bont retired.

The likes of Christopher McQuarrie and Christopher Nolan aside, many of today's action directors are more risk-averse than de Bont, less interested in performing in-camera stunts live and on location. As such, he admits that not much grabs him anymore. "A lot of modern action movies are missing the soul — there's no sense of scale," he says. "It's impossible for an actor to even understand the scene they're in." Nolan, in fact, has cited *Speed* as a direct inspiration for *Dunkirk*'s kinetic dynamism, describing it as a "ticking-clock nail-biter". De Bont, in kind, mentions *Oppenheimer* as the last movie he truly enjoyed. He hasn't yet, he says, seen Lee Isaac Chung's *Twisters*.

For de Bont, cinema is all or nothing. Whether it's paying for cargo planes to land in the background of *Speed*'s airport scene or acquiring dual Boeing 707 jet engines to create authentic tornado gusts in *Twister*, every filmmaking flourish is in pursuit of enhancing the cinematic experience — and to keep challenging himself. "People have to reinvent themselves," he says. All of which begs the question: is it time for Jan de Bont to come back for one more movie to remind everyone what we're missing? "Well — we'll see about that," he says.

Should you find yourself on set of a Jan de Bont film in the future, then, bring a hard hat. And get out of the way.

SCALING



EMBARKING ON

LIVE-ACTION REMAKES

OF BELOVED FILMS CAN

BE HAZARDOUS.

BUT ON SET OF

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

U P

WE FOUND A CAST AND CREW

DETERMINED TO HIT

NEW HEIGHTS

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

Empire is in the arena. A towering one at that. Below us, etched deep in the dirt, are giant, ominous scratch-marks. Surrounding us are huge stone walls. This building is designed for one thing: dragon-wrangling.

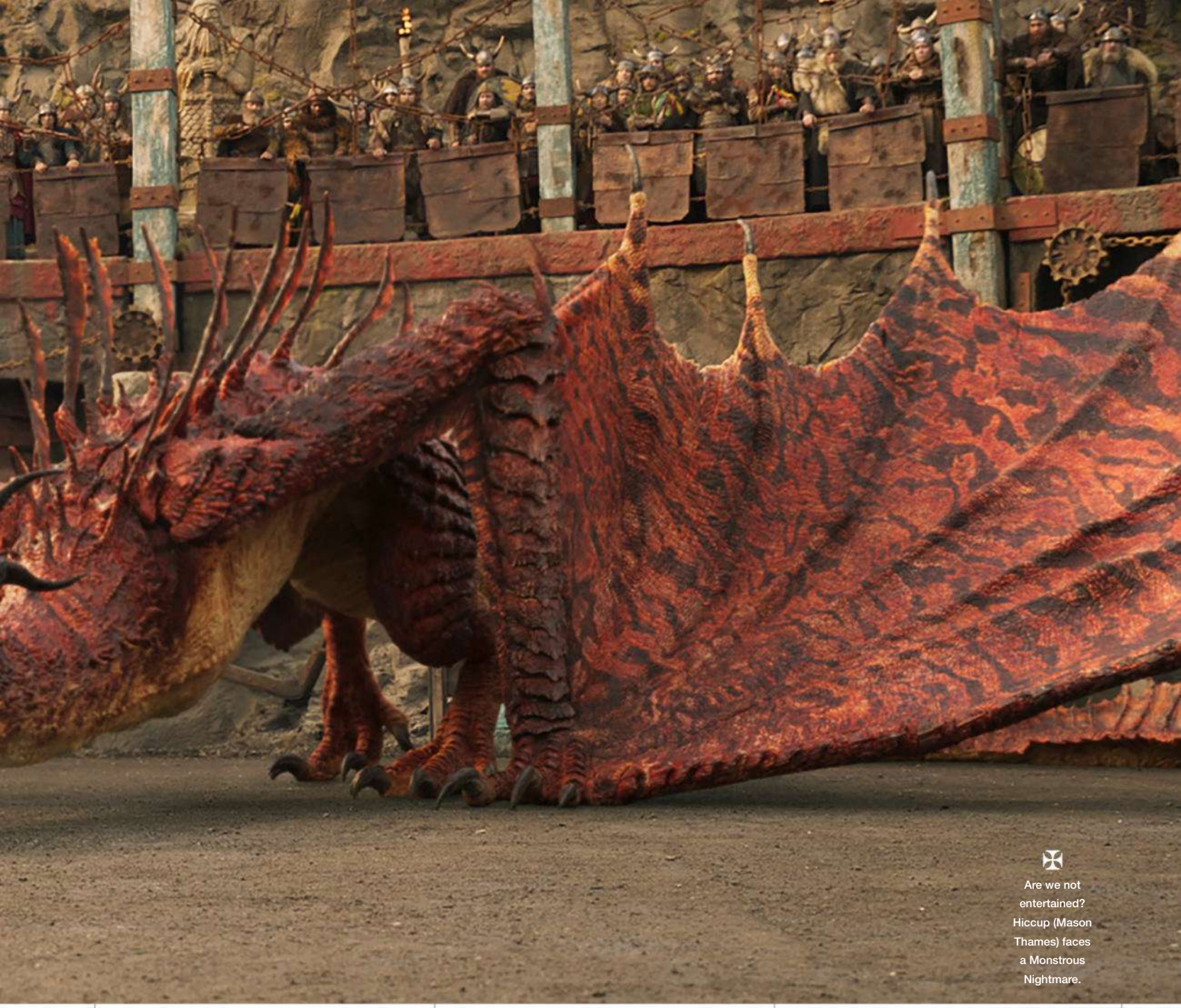
The bricks are scorched, signatures of the same beasts whose talons have left impressive grooves in the ground. It's March 2024, on an overcast day in Belfast, two months into the *How To Train Your Dragon* shoot, and to all intents and purposes, we're standing in a living, breathing, battle-beaten Berk — the franchise's fictional Viking town.

Beyond the arena lies a full-scale line-up of huts where the Vikings live, clustered around a glittering, intricate mosaic. A few weeks earlier, real fish had been kept in one of the huts, adding a potent layer of authenticity to the set, which has been painstakingly built on the lot usually reserved for *Game Of Thrones* spin-offs. A huge Viking ship rests near the dock. There's not a blue screen in sight.

The live-action film, about cheeky dragon Toothless and his human pal Hiccup, is a retelling of the 2010 animated feature directed by Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders. Based on Cressida Cowell's popular children's books, the story follows the unlikely bond between the dragon and the awkward son of a dragonslayer, who must prove to the dwellers of Berk that they're stronger together than apart. The original film fuelled two DeBlois-helmed sequels, with the trilogy raking in $1.6 billion and four Oscar nominations.

DeBlois — who directs this new take too — is a full-bearded, Nordic-jumper-sporting fellow who looks exactly like he's wandered out of his own movie. "He *is* a Viking. That's just his vibe," says Nico Parker, who plays the sparky, skilled Astrid.

DeBlois has been working on the franchise since 2008, when he was called in by his fellow *Lilo & Stitch* director Sanders to pair up again for the first animated *Dragon* outing. Since then, the movies have touched a proud fanbase who not only



Are we not entertained? Hiccup (Mason Thames) faces a Monstrous Nightmare.

love them but have been defined by them. Even the new movie's leading man. "It really shaped who I was as a kid, just like a lot of people who watched it growing up," enthuses Mason Thames about the first instalment. "I was Hiccup for Halloween."

Returning to Berk, DeBlois knew that he had a responsibility to the Masons of the world — to honour those characters' legacies. His endeavour would be as passionate as the story itself.

Animation is in DeBlois' bones: he joined Walt Disney Feature Animation as a storyboard artist in 1994 and worked his way up. But the desire to branch into live-action filmmaking had long been on his mind. This in part came to him via his collaboration with legendary cinematographer Roger Deakins, who worked as visual consultant on the original trilogy. "We deliberately embraced the idea of real stakes and real peril and real physics, which made the animated film feel different than a lot of animated films before," says DeBlois. "It straddled the line between animation and live-action."

Now, DeBlois had his shot to raise those stakes further. But he hadn't been living under a boulder. The cynicism surrounding live-action takes on beloved animated films has been ringing out for years, and he believes that the wrong calls have been made in some instances. "If we're going to change things, they should feel like improvements. Or there should be a real reason why," he says. And so he set to work on taking things on a step.

A notable change to *HTTYD*'s story is spotted during *Empire*'s visit to Berk, where at the top of the dragon-fighting arena, prop statues of resident Vikings are erected. "One of the first things that [co-writers] Mark Platt, Adam Siegel and I talked about was that this version could answer a few questions we all had about the first film, like: 'Where did this tribe of Vikings come from, and why did they choose to stay there on that rugged island beset with dragons when they could have up and left?'" DeBlois explains. They decided to make Berk — which is located next to a cavernous dragon nest — a destination where many cultures could come together under one Viking banner, united in fighting a common enemy. "So we have different weaponry, different costuming, different art represented in the sculptures and tapestries, and different faces." It meant more freedom when it came to shaping the Vikings' identities. For Parker, her hair was key to stepping into playing Astrid. "We looked at references and really old Viking artefacts of people with braided and woven hair. We really got into that," she says.

The new cultural make-up of Berk also helped with DeBlois' mission to up the story's stakes, as dragon-battling Viking-leader Stoick attempts to keep his mishmash community spirited in the face of a stark winter and depleted supplies. "People could starve and we're constantly being attacked. I think you do feel ›

more pressure on Stoick and more dissent amongst the voices of the people," says Gerard Butler, who is reprising the role in live-action.

It's rare that actors make the leap from voicing animated characters to playing their flesh-and-bone counterparts. But over their years working together, Butler and DeBlois have struck up a longstanding friendship — "We've spent time travelling around Iceland and sitting in pubs and having meals," says the director. Butler agrees: "We both love Vikings and the mythology, and I think we both feel that in our blood." Their bond — and of course Butler's towering physique and authoritative energy — meant that Stoick was in safe hands. Even if it took, in the filmmaker's words, "a bit of Gerry rigging".

Butler's packed schedule and then the 2023 actors' strike meant that he initially was unable to sign up, a crushing blow to DeBlois. Other actors were being considered when the director thought he'd try his luck with Butler's team again, only to be told that he was too busy. "I [texted] Gerry and I said, 'Just so you know, we really tried, and it's really disappointing to me that you can't assume the role,'" he remembers ruefully. Butler remembers it too. "Immediately I went, 'Wait a minute, wait a minute. What are you saying here?'" There was, in fact, some wiggle room, and Butler was determined to make it work. "Dean really fought hard to get me, when maybe the studio was saying, 'Do we not get somebody bigger?'" Fellow Vikings must look out for each other, after all.

With Stoick struggling to maintain morale in his homeland, the strain on his relationship with Hiccup is heightened, with the latter expected to step up and help with the hunt. A major driving force in the original film was a teenager's need for approval from his father, though Hiccup, with his toothpick physique and gentle nature, instead evokes shame in the broad, war-hardened Stoick. This element of the story strikes an especially personal chord with DeBlois. "It's certainly something that Gerard and Mason were able to dig into — this idea of parental expectation based upon their own lives," says the director. But he also drew from his own life.

"When I was young, I was the apple of [my father's] eye, but when I was a cheeky teenager we butted heads a lot," explains DeBlois. "Then he passed away when I was still a teenager, so we never had the chance to make amends at a time when we had a bit of an acrimonious relationship." Stoick and Hiccup's eventual bond becomes, he says, "the making-amends moment that I never had."

Hiccup's casting would also prove a challenge, but more on account of the metaphorical shoes that he had to fill. Jay Baruchel's version of the teenager in the animated films had a dry, quick sense of humour undercutting the heart-on-his-sleeve angst. DeBlois was looking for a teen actor who would be able to channel a similar vulnerability and "gangly quality" when, during a flight to London to discuss casting, he watched Scott Derrickson's child-kidnap horror *The Black Phone*, starring

Clockwise from above: Toothless made flesh — or at least, photo-realistic pixel; Writer-director Dean DeBlois directs Gabriel Howell (Snotlout) and Nico Parker (Astrid); There be dragons!; Dark times; Stoick (Gerard Butler, returning to the role) with Hiccup (Mason Thames).

Thames. Months later, when DeBlois called him after the casting process to tell him that he'd got the part, the actor declared that it was the best moment of his life. "It's *still* surreal to me," marvels Thames.

So, *HTTYD* may have landed its dream Stoick and Hiccup, but that was only half the battle. The film's winged MVP was yet to enter the arena.

Over the years, Toothless has become more than just the beating heart of these movies. With his odd yet endearing mannerisms, this inky salamander-panther-type dragon is something of a mascot for misfits, not least on the film set, where one of the producers shows *Empire* around while sporting a Toothless beanie hat. Elsewhere, we see that DeBlois' black van has been given green headlights to match the dragon's eyes. Bottling Toothless' spirit and bringing it into a live-action context would be no small feat.

When it came to his burgeoning bond with his co-star, Thames spent his rehearsals running around with the full-scale puppets, and learned horse-riding to aid with the flight sequences. "I'm from Texas, so you'd think I'd know how to ride a horse, but it was my first time," laughs the actor. For the heart-to-heart stuff, though, he drew upon his relationship with Baryshnikov, or 'Brish', his pitbull boxer. "He's my baby," says Thames cheerfully.

To many, this is another reason why Toothless tugs at the heartstrings; there's a companion-like quality to him that's reminiscent of a much-loved, if humongous, pet. Christian Manz, the visual-effects supervisor, also used his dog when crafting the character's mannerisms, he tells us on set. "The other day I showed Dean a video of [me] rubbing him and laughing, and he's showing his teeth because I think he's trying to imitate what I'm doing."

In order to preserve Toothless' original charm for his CGI makeover, the design team

kept his huge peepers and Peanuts-style wiggly mouth, while the other dragons received a more realistic, animal-like update. "But there's a lot more detail," DeBlois promises. "There's a sense of muscles moving under skin and the jiggle of loose wing-membrane. It's there, but he doesn't lose his cuteness." And with the animated film's epic flight sequences being revisited — aided by *The Matrix* cinematographer Bill Pope, who came via Deakins' recommendation — those muscles and that membrane will certainly be put to work.

DeBlois' excitement at bringing everything to life is undeniable. "It was a parking-lot two months [earlier], and then it was a Viking village," he tells *Empire* of the set, after the film has wrapped. "I was squealing inside all of the time." It's an experience that even Butler, with all of his experience, found unique. "[The sets] were incredible," he enthuses. "Especially when the set-decorators would come in and light the torches, and you would look at a part in the far distance that nobody's ever going to see. [There were people] there grooming the grass — individual bits of grass — just to plump it up and make it feel alive again."

On set, *Empire* visits Gobber the Belch's (Nick Frost) blacksmith's workshop, where foreboding tools — and weapons — litter the walls. And of course, there are the dragons themselves. Back in the arena, at the base of a chain-link door, Harry Trevaldwyn — playing teen Viking Tuffnut — is lying face up, wrestling with a fully-functioning puppet of the small dragon known as the Terrible Terror.

Puppets being used as stand-ins for the CG dragons had been an idea from the start. In order to make the actors' performances feel as genuine as possible, the team behind the stage production of *War Horse* were called in to operate moving model dragons throughout the shoot. "That was an interesting experience because when I made *300*, we were often just reacting off a photograph stuck on a pole," laughs Butler. 'The puppeteers in this movie were extraordinary and very much brought Toothless to life. [I] felt I could truly throw my hate and fury towards this kind of living entity." DeBlois' live-action mission had been accomplished.

I looked over five seconds [in] and my mom was crying," says Thames, of watching an early cut of the film, sitting with his family and DeBlois. Leaving the cinema, he saw that his dad, who he describes as a big, tall guy — the Stoick comparison isn't lost on him — was also in tears. It wasn't simply from the relief that they weren't having to watch *The Black Phone* ("At least I'm not getting kidnapped again!" Thames quips), but rather the full-circle experience of watching their kid, who used to dress up as Hiccup, become Hiccup.

It was also a big moment for DeBlois: working with an actor whom had grown up on his films was significant. "Not to sound too grand about it, but what I responded to in *Star Wars* growing up — how it captured my imagination, filled me with aspirations and steered me toward a career in storytelling and filmmaking — our films have steered the careers of a whole young set that will eventually replace us," says the director. And it was DeBlois who the young cast looked up to. "We are obsessed with Dean," says Parker. "It's strange how much we love Dean. If Dean, at the end of the day, watches the movie and feels proud of what he's made and proud of us, then that is the only real thing that matters.'"

Of course, in the animated world, Toothless and Hiccup's journey continued beyond this first story. "The second movie was always my favourite," says Thames of the sequel, in which hundreds more dragons abound. Thames admits that certain scenes still make him cry. "All the action sequences, [and] how the relationships have evolved five years after the first film... seeing a version of that in live-action would be really cool." He'll be happy: a few weeks after we spoke, that version was announced, to be released in cinemas in summer 2027, with DeBlois and the lead cast members returning.

And, of course, there's more to mine. But whatever the future holds beyond these two films, Toothless and Hiccup will forever sit firmly in DeBlois' heart. "We champion the oddities and weirdos because they have the courage to stand [against] judgement and expectation," he tells *Empire*. "Those are always the characters that I want to cheer for. I want to follow their stories."

In the original *How To Train Your Dragon*, Hiccup describes his first encounter with Toothless to a disbelieving Astrid. "I looked at him, and I saw myself," he explains. And yes, DeBlois has outward similarities with his characters, but below the surface a much deeper bond runs still. That talk of needing a reason to embark on this new, laborious journey and prove the live-action cynics wrong? For DeBlois, it doesn't get more real than this.

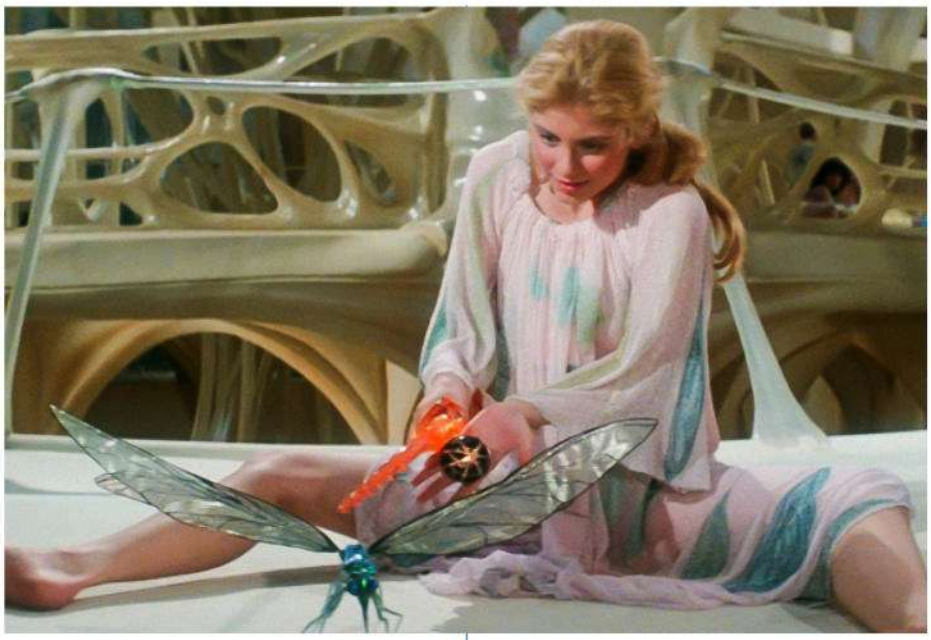
HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON IS IN CINEMAS FROM 9 JUNE

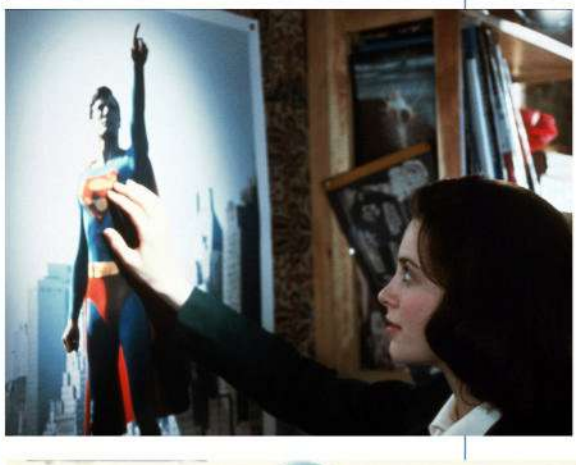
FLYING BLIND

WORDS
MIKE RYAN

AS A NEW DC UNIVERSE PREPARES FOR LAUNCH, WE REVISIT PIONEERING SPIN-OFF **SUPERGIRL** — THE FIRST MAJOR BIG-SCREEN ADVENTURE FOR A FEMALE SUPERHERO. AS ITS MAKERS TELL US, IT WAS UNCHARTED AND OFTEN VERY ODD TERRITORY…

PAUL SHIPPER





LET'S SET A SCENE.

Let's say you're the producer of two extremely successful Superman movies, with a third on the way. Let's say you're looking to expand the Superman cinematic universe with another superhero. Ah, Supergirl! An inspired choice and, frankly, ahead of its time. And you'll cast it with a likeable, wide-eyed unknown as the title character, just like 1978's *Superman*.

Dolly Parton, you think, would be great as the villain. Oh — she doesn't want to do it. Let's get a moustache-twirling Faye Dunaway! Peter Cook as her smothered-in-wearied-sarcasm warlock-boyfriend called... Nigel? Perfect. While we're at it, let's just cast the rest of the film with a smorgasbord of screen legends who all seem to be acting in their own private movie. Peter O'Toole wants to ad lib a scene where he squirts some sort of unidentified liquid into Supergirl's mouth? While repeating the word "squirt" over and over for no discernible reason? Sure.

Welcome to one of the campiest films of the 1980s. Which is *really* saying something.

The formula of hiring an unknown for the lead and then surrounding them with legendary actors had worked before. In Richard Donner's *Superman*, the critical hit and financial juggernaut that would launch the modern superhero movie as we still know it today, a young Christopher Reeve was cast in the title role, with the supporting characters filled out by Hollywood luminaries like Marlon Brando, Gene Hackman and Ned Beatty. *Superman* would go on to make $300 million (in 1978 money), while its 1980 follow-up, *Superman II*, made a still robust $216 million. (*Superman III* took home a mere $80 million, but *Supergirl* was already in production.)

For 1984's *Supergirl*, Helen Slater was cast as Superman's cousin. And, she too was surrounded by an almost *too* impressive cast, some of them Academy Award nominees. It was all tried and tested. Hey, what could possibly go wrong?

In an alternate reality, *Supergirl* was directed by *West Side Story*'s Robert Wise, with the lead squaring off against an evil villain played by country and western superstar Dolly Parton, hot off the heels of *9 To 5* and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*.

"It was going to be Robert Wise at one point. It was going to be Dolly Parton," confirms producer Ilya Salkind (who co-produced the first three *Superman* movies and *Santa Claus: The Movie* with his father, Alexander) today. He continues, noticeably wistful from the start: "It was a whole different thing."

During the events of *Supergirl*, we meet young Kara (Slater) in Argo City — basically a city of Kryptonian refugees hurtling through space after the destruction of their planet that we witnessed at the beginning of *Superman*. Peter O'Toole plays Zaltar, a wizard toying around with an item that creates magical wonder called the Omegahedron. But, it turns out, this miraculous device also powers the whole city, and Zaltar winds up accidentally losing it to the vastness of outer space. In an effort to save her city, Kara goes after the Omegahedron, which crashes on Earth and winds up in the hands of Faye Dunaway's witch Selena, who, as witches often do, uses the Omegahedron for evil. When Kara crash-lands on Earth she realises, just like her cousin, she has superhuman powers.

"It was about a girl superhero, and that had never been done before," says director Jeannot Szwarc. "That's one of the things that attracted me." Coming from a female character's perspective, he says, the film would feel different from *Superman*. Szwarc was coming off *Jaws 2* (which in recent years has gained popularity by generating a popular meme about shitty politicians staying in power, since the mayor from the first *Jaws*, who literally got people killed, is still the mayor in *Jaws 2*) and *Somewhere In Time* (a beautiful film starring Christopher Reeve, whose character falls in love with a photo of Jane Seymour, then travels back in time to meet her). He was hired after a few other directors passed, including, as mentioned, Robert

Alamy, Allstar, Imago, Mary Evans

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Superhero naif Kara (Helen Slater); Can you dig it?; Kindred spirits; Faye Dunaway's Selena (a big Daft Punk fan?). **This page, above:** Supergirl in full flight. **Left:** Director Jeannot Szwarc. **Right:** An imperilled Zaltar (Peter O'Toole) and Kara.

Wise, who had most recently directed *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. Ilya Salkind remembers, "We had a lunch in New York, Robert Wise and myself. He was ready to do it! I don't know what happened, but he didn't do it and we went with Jeannot." And Dolly Parton? Despite being offered $7 million to play Selena, she was insulted by the role. "Do I come across as an evil witch to you?" she asked the producers.

In casting the title role, Alexander Salkind (who died in 1997) had his eyes set on one actor in particular. "He wanted Brooke Shields," says Ilya of his dad's plans. "[But] I went with having the idea of having an unknown, like we did with *Superman*."

Szwarc, who mentions that Demi Moore also auditioned, says, "I had this feeling that if we got someone who was very well known, the part would not have that kind of discovery about herself that the film asks for. That's why when I saw Helen, I was delighted, because she had everything I was looking for. She impressed ›

me more than anybody else, because there was something fresh and unknown. I thought that would be good for the character."

Helen Slater had never been in a movie before. She was just 18 when she was cast as *Supergirl*, after open auditions. Speaking to *Empire* now, she recalls the whole experience to be quite the challenge. "To be shot out from obscurity? Moving to London by myself? Gaining the 20 lb or whatever it was? It was almost like a boot camp. I was horseback riding, fencing, doing trampoline work, running, weightlifting three times a week, swimming three times a week."

And all of a sudden here she was... going head to head with Faye Dunaway and Peter O'Toole. *Supergirl* was about to take flight.

So, the aforementioned squirting incident. Supergirl has been sent to the Phantom Zone, reunited with her friend Zaltar, who was banished there years before. Slater, breezy and curious, is certainly in character, but it's difficult to tell exactly what O'Toole thinks he's doing in this scene — or if he even knows the cameras are rolling at all. Slater asks, "Zaltar?" And O'Toole, holding what appears to be a glass bottle containing... *something*, replies, "Squirt," then squirts whatever this liquid is into his mouth four times. Then he gives Slater two squirts, that she immediately spits out. This mysterious liquid has, apparently, absolutely nothing to do with the plot.

What does Slater make of this today? Not much. "I'm going to actually have to watch the movie because I do not have a memory of him squirting something from a canister into my mouth," she says. Szwarc remembers, but he's none the wiser. "I never knew what was in the liquid," he says. "Some of it I think he ad-libbed. But I let him do it because I think it worked." Salkind also remembers, but is similarly unclear. "I think that was his idea," he says of O'Toole. "I don't know what liquid it was."

Meanwhile, there was Faye Dunaway. Szwarc laughs when we mention her. "Faye? I think she loved being an evil witch. I told her to go in and have fun, and she had fun. You can see she's enjoying what she's doing."

Salkind had worked with Dunaway before, on *The Three Musketeers* and *The Four Musketeers*, both directed by *Superman II* and *III* director Richard Lester. "She was not great on *The Three Musketeers* and *The Four Musketeers*," says the producer. "There, she was very difficult. She was always late. We had to change the shooting so it would start with her in the afternoon because she was never there in the morning."

So why hire her for *Supergirl*? "Well, because she was fantastic in the film," he asserts. This time, he says, "Faye was absolutely perfect. She was great. On *Supergirl*, she was absolutely perfect." Dunaway is undeniably entertaining in the role, although Salkind does wonder how things might have been if his director had had more tenacity. "Perhaps if Jeannot had been tougher, I don't know, perhaps we would have fought more to get Dolly Parton," he says. As Slater says of

This page, top to bottom: Selena gives the magic finger as henchwoman Bianca (Brenda Vaccaro) and Supergirl watch; A dragon-like manifestation of the Omegahedron; If looks could kill. **Facing page, top to bottom:** When all else fails, deploy the lightsab- oh, wrong film; Simon Ward and Mia Farrow (as Supergirl's dad Zor-El and mum Alura In-Ze) round out the starry cast.

her A-list co-stars, "It's fun just trying to imagine being offered *Supergirl* if I were them. Maybe it was for the money. But it also must have been, '*Well, this will be fun.*'"

There was also talk of another star joining them: the big hope was that Christopher Reeve, who had just worked with Szwarc on *Somewhere In Time*, would cameo as Superman. Alas, "Christopher wanted to get away from the Superman image. In a way, I understood, and we never talked about it," says the director. "Yes, it was disappointing," says Salkind.

As the lead, though, Slater delighted them all. She put her life in their hands, up there being bounced about on wires as Szwarc closes in on her face to prove, yep, that's Helen Slater. "Helen was fantastic about it," he recalls. "She herself was like, 'Wow, I can't believe I'm doing this.' That was nice." He's right: she couldn't believe it. "It was scary to do those flying sequences," says Slater. "Just being up on the wires and being up that high. The overall feeling — and I think it's partly youth and your brain isn't fully developed — it was just this abundant feeling of freedom and joy."

The shoot was generally harmonious. However, as he implied when discussing Dunaway versus Parton, Salkind wound up missing the dynamic he had with both Richard Donner and Richard Lester on the Superman films. "Jeannot is a lovely guy," says Salkind. "Jeannot is *too* nice. A very nice guy, but too nice as a director. I had fights with Donner. I had fights with Lester. I never had a fight with Jeannot. Never. And somehow, I guess something happens, because with Donner we did a great film. With Lester we did great films. I guess the fights help. They must help somehow. They create tension."

Salkind, it seems, had hoped for a better film. And audiences and critics agreed.

"It was, of course, a big disappointment," says Szwarc of *Supergirl*'s box office and reviews. "I was surprised. I expected it to do better. But it was a little bit ahead of its time. I don't know if a big audience was ready for a Supergirl. I think if it would have been a little bit later, it would have done better." (When *Empire* spoke to Szwarc, he was retired, living in the French countryside. Sadly, a few weeks later he passed away at the age of 85.)

Slater, as the face of the film, took some hits. "When you're really young and get knocked about like that, it doesn't feel great," she remembers. "I don't remember being particularly devastated by it, but it always feels crappy to be criticised like that. It was a little disappointing, because it always feels icky to have people say negative things about you. I think that's just part of the human experience. It just doesn't feel great."

Still, she was excited, decades later, to make a brief cameo as Supergirl in 2023's *The Flash*, where she shows up in a dizzying montage of the live-action DC universe. "A lot of people don't think I was even there because of the CGI, but I actually flew to London and filmed for a day for that sequence," she recalls. "I really liked *The Flash*. I know that also got some mixed reviews, but I thought it was so clever, and well done." She is optimistic for the cinematic future of Supergirl (who also had a great, six-season run on television between 2015 and 2021), with Craig Gillespie's new take out next year. "I think James Gunn is the right person," says Slater of the man behind DC's new era. "I think he'll treat it with great respect and great care. Milly Alcock is a phenomenal actress. Knowing Supergirl had one place, and now we're going to see it evolve and keep going... I'll have a front-row seat."

So, what's the legacy of 1984's *Supergirl*? It was a bold swing to make a female-led superhero this early in the genre, when even today they are all too rare. It was another bold swing to attempt to build a superhero cinematic universe when no-one else would try this for over two decades. (Christopher Reeve may have said no, but Marc McClure, Jimmy Olsen in the *Superman* films, had a substantial role in *Supergirl*, in which Jimmy is dating Lois Lane's younger sister, Lucy, a friend of Supergirl's alter ego, Linda Lee.)

When we spoke, Szwarc still maintained that *Supergirl* was ahead of its time, and that audiences just weren't ready for it yet. Ilya Salkind thinks it just wasn't good enough. The truth is maybe somewhere in-between. The film's crazy plot points would, for better or worse, likely not be attempted today. The result was a true fever-dream, a madcap adventure with an unbelievably stacked cast. It certainly didn't lack ambition. Maybe we should all have a little bit of whatever it was Peter O'Toole was squirting that day.

IN THE HEIGHTS

CHARTING SUPERGIRL'S HIGH-FLYING HISTORY

FIRST CONTACT

(Action Comics #252)

Kara Zor-El made her debut alongside supervillain Metallo (yeah, we've never heard of him either) way back in May 1959. And you can tell it was in 1959 without even looking at the cover: her powers — super-breath and super-strength — were introduced via her cleaning her room and fixing furniture.

HORSING AROUND

(Adventure Comics #390)

Now let's be clear, the Silver Age of comics was (in)famously weird. But there's weird, and then there's 'Supergirl once unwittingly smooched a cursed super-horse at the Supergirl Dude Ranch' weird. A colt classic this 1970 tale ain't — but worth a Google. Just keep 'Safe Search' on, eh?

THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

(Crisis On Infinite Earths #7)

Unless you're someone Spider-Man loves, dying in comic books tends to be no biggie. But when Supergirl sacrificed herself to save Superman during DC's *Crisis On Infinite Earths* crossover, her death was *monumental*. And this 1985 issue's iconic cover, featuring a sobbing Kal-El holding his cousin's lifeless body, perfectly captures the heartbreak of reading it.

COMING OF AGE

(Supergirl: Woman Of Tomorrow)

Tom King's audacious, standalone 2021 miniseries — *True Grit* with space dragons — excavates a now-adult Kara Zor-El's past traumas to illuminate anew her true heroism. There's a reason James Gunn is introducing Milly Alcock's Kara in a take on *Woman Of Tomorrow*: it's the definitive Supergirl story. **JORDAN KING**

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

SUMMER 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

Star Baker

ANORA DIRECTOR SEAN BAKER ON THE ULTIMATE HOLLYWOOD HANDSHAKE — SWEEPING THE OSCARS

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

APPROPRIATELY, BEING THAT Sean Baker's *Anora* is a fairy tale of sorts, it has been for the filmmaker — and its tinsel-haired star, Mikey Madison — too. With a mere $6 million budget, the bitingly comedic drama, about a young sex-worker caught up in a frantic battle of wills (and henchmen) after marrying the son of a Russian oligarch, stormed the awards circuit. It won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, Madison bagged a BAFTA, and then it took home *five* Oscars — one for Madison, and four with Baker's name on them, including Best Director and Best Picture, a record number of wins for one person for an individual film. Now *that's* a happy ending.

Anora is Baker's eighth film, and all are uniquely his, each boasting vibrancy, authenticity and fly-on-the-wall energy. When we talk in mid-March, to discuss *Anora*'s Criterion Collection release, he's still reeling from the Oscars, and life is no less hectic: he's in Orlando, working on a 4K release of his 2017 drama, *The Florida Project*. "It hasn't stopped," he says. "We went right from the Oscars to freaking... we went to Japan to promote *Anora*, and then back to LA do our last Q&A at the New Beverly, Tarantino's theatre. And now we're here; it's stupid. We should probably go to sleep." But not before speaking to *Empire*. Sorry, Sean.

Anora's journey has been incredible, culminating in five Oscars. Is there a part of you that finds it difficult to process?

Definitely. The reason I mentioned what I was doing after the Oscars is because, to tell you the truth, I *didn't* have time to process. It wasn't until I finished that last Q&A, three nights ago at the New Beverly, that it felt like the end of the tour. So I've been processing it and thinking about it. I actually texted Mikey last night and said, "It's finally sinking in. We did it. I can't believe we just swept the Oscars!" And she said, "Yeah, we did!" So it's something that's just happening now for me. Yeah, it's very, very surreal, because we had no expectations of any wins at all. We were so happy just to play in competition at Cannes. We thought, "There's no way it could ever win, because it's a comedy, and it's rare that comedies win at Cannes." When we won, that was something I had to process, for quite a while. So I can't even believe what has happened after that. Yeah, it really is mind-blowing.

When a film wins big at the Oscars, suddenly it gets advertised again, with all the little pictures of the statuettes; suddenly it has that extra significance and weight attached to it. Does that change _your_ feeling about it too?

Of course, of course. Also, unfortunately, when you win, it brings an automatic hate, too. Because there are the contrarians who are like, "That shouldn't have won," and, "This is the weakest Sean Baker film..." And that starts to have an effect on you, like, "Maybe they're right." Because I'm very susceptible to that stuff, unfortunately. But the Daniels reached out to me — two wonderful guys, Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan — and they gave me really wonderful words of encouragement and support. They said, "Guillermo del Toro told us, 'Ignore all the hate that's going to come your way,' and we're telling you now: ignore all the hate that's going to come your way." You wonder, "Was it just the right moment [for this film to win]?" I don't know. But it definitely puts you in a place

Above: Opposites attract in *Anora*.
Left: Writer-director Sean Baker directs stars Mikey Madison (Ani) and Mark Eydelshteyn (Vanya).

of existential crisis. And I also... (*Big sigh*) Yeah, it's overwhelming, I must say, it really is. I hope the film doesn't age poorly. I don't know, man. I don't know.

I didn't mean it in a negative way at all.
Yeah, but I beat myself up, I get very... (*Sigh*) I still have imposter syndrome. It hasn't gone away at all.

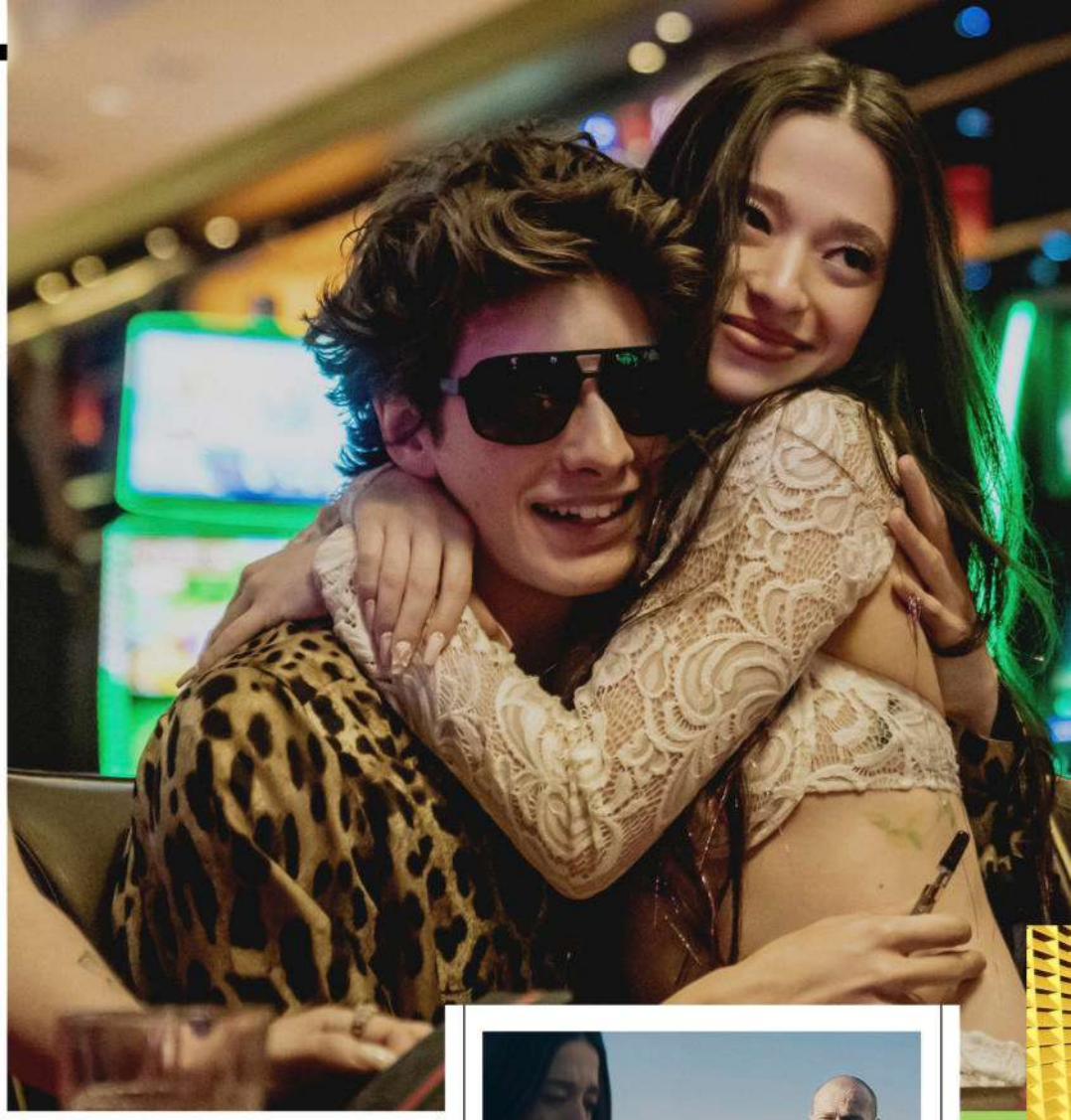
Even after all of this.
Maybe it will eventually. I'm worried, though, because now there's a lot of pressure on the *next* film, and I'm intentionally not going to do what everybody wants me to do. I'm going to go in the opposite direction. And that's scary too, because now I know that my next film will probably be a financial bomb. So there's a lot of stuff going on in my head about everything, the pressure of ›

everything. And I just want people to be happy. I'm constantly texting Mikey's reps, saying, "Are you guys happy? I just want you guys to be happy." I want all the crew and everybody to just be joyous. Maybe I'm trying to live through them. I don't know. I haven't thought much about this. You have to understand, you're the first person I'm talking to about this. I got on the phone with my therapist yesterday morning for the first time in literally three months. And so I haven't been able to form thoughts about this.

You did four speeches that night, and they were all individual sort of mission statements, with a cumulative effect. How prepared were you for it all?
Well, with the whole Oscar run, you have all of these events that, if you're lucky enough to win, give you practice. So I did learn as I was approaching the Oscars that I'd better go in prepared. Not completely prepared, but *enough*. And so yes, there was some calculation, to be honest. I don't know if that paints me in the best light, but there *had* to be, because I didn't want to get up there and waste time. And there were things that I really, really did want to say, such as this battle-cry about saving theatres. I knew that wouldn't work if I won for Editing or Screenplay, so I was holding off on that, just in case I won Best Director or Best Picture.

So yes, there was a certain amount of calculation but... I'm worried about jinxing. I actually don't even think about winning [things] at all, but you're forced to, because you have to be responsible. But there was a moment where Best Director came up, and Quentin Tarantino walked out onto the stage, and in that moment, I have to tell you, it was the first time I've *ever* felt positive at an award show. It was like, "Oh my God, this was meant to happen. This was meant to be." Because it would be a full-circle moment with Quentin, not only about Mikey (*Baker cast Madison in* Anora *after seeing her raise hell in* Once Upon A Time In Hollywood), but about our shared love of theatres and of the same movies. And I'm inspired by him. So he was coming out, and I'm like, "This is gonna happen. This is literally gonna happen right now." That's the only time I've ever felt positive about something happening.

There's an *Anora* documentary on the new disc, and by that evidence it seems everything basically went right on this film. There's no drama. It's not *Hearts Of Darkness* — it just looked like everything went well. Is that the truth of it?
Hearts Of Darkness was going on inside me (*laughs*), okay, that was happening. That was definitely happening. To tell you the truth, I even kind of went through a midlife crisis making the film. It was a really emotional journey for me and, maybe, my wife [*Anora* producer Samantha Quan]. But we kept it pretty much away from everybody. The minute we got onto set, we just focused on making the best movie possible. There were hiccups and speed-bumps but for the most part, things went well.

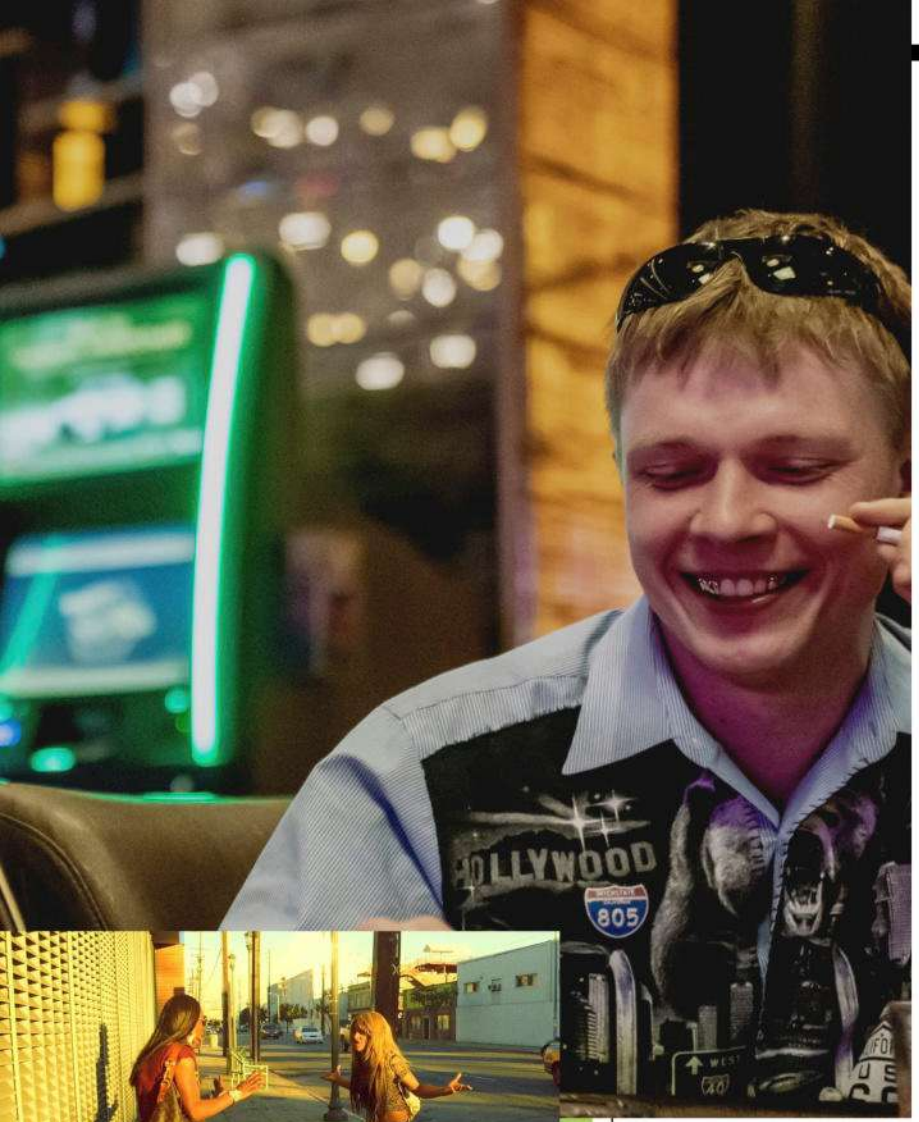


"My films have been made without any compromise."

Things have been going well for you since *Tangerine* (2015), which was a turning point, and took you into this next phase. Up until then you'd been feeling pretty down about your future as a filmmaker. What does it feel like to look back on the ten years since then?
It's been nice. It's always weird to hear that *Tangerine* was my breakout, because it was my fifth film. But yeah, it went to Sundance and got more exposure than the previous ones, and it led to *Florida Project*. Willem Dafoe was interested in doing *Florida Project* because of *Tangerine*. He showed up on set and he looked at the 35-millimetre camera, and he said, "I thought we were making an iPhone movie."

Above, top to bottom: *Anora*: Taking a gamble; Oscar-nominated Yura Borisov; The high life; Darya Ekamasova as Vanya's mum Galina.

Getty Images, Universal



Below left, top to bottom: *Tangerine* (2015); Willem Dafoe in *The Florida Project* (2017); *Red Rocket* (2021). **Above:** Owning the Oscars on 2 March.

No joke. He actually signed up because of that. Because, you know, Willem loves to experiment and try different things, so he was like, "Okay, 35 again, I guess..." But yeah, it's been a nice ten years. I take my filmography very seriously. I don't want to do a 'one for them, one for me' sort of thing, because I don't want to fuck up my filmography. So that's why I'm sticking with these 'all for me's, which is not the best when it comes to making money, but it's my only way. So yeah, I'm really happy with the last ten years in terms of *Florida Project*, *Red Rocket* and now *Anora*. They're films that have been made without any compromise. I was able to do exactly what I wanted to do.

Let's go back years, way before *Tangerine*, even. In the early 2000s you worked for, among other things, a wedding-video company. And one wedding in particular inspired *Anora*, because it was in New York's Brighton Beach and introduced you to what goes on down there.
Yeah, actually I edited a couple of wedding videos that that led to *Anora*. I was introduced to that world through editing these videos, and I was like, "Man, this is special." That's why I always tell young filmmakers — you never know where you're gonna get inspiration from.

Do you think there's anything of your filmmaking style in those wedding videos?
I think so. I knew that I had to deliver, because the bride and groom, this means everything to them, right? Everything. Their family was spending thousands of dollars on this wedding video, and I really wanted to give them my all. And I would. I would edit these things with a lot of heart. And so probably you *do* see it, yeah.

I love that there's a few couples somewhere who've got wedding videos that were the genesis for what is now this multi-Oscar-winning film.
Yeah! I know. There's no way they would know, because it wasn't like my name was on them as editor. They were done for a wedding-video production company. And so I was an anonymous editor. I was mostly an editor. I did shoot some of them, but never edited one that I shot.

I'm a little sad that there's nothing from those wedding videos included on the *Anora* disc.
You know what, the guy who I used to work for in, my God, 1999, 2000, just reached out to me to congratulate me. So I should probably contact him and see if he has any of them. (*Laughs*)

Finally, the most surprising fact that I took away from the documentary is that you did 6,000 push-ups during the *Anora* production.
Yeah, I do these weird challenges. It's partly to get me to continue exercising when I don't have a lot of time to hit the gym. But also it's this weird sort of superstitious thing, and I did it again just before the Oscars. Oh my *Christ*, that was *crazy*. Because on February 2nd I said, "I have one month 'til the Oscars, so I'm gonna do 2,800 push-ups and 2,800 squats." And I did it, I pulled it off, but I had to catch up in the last three days before the Oscars. I had finished my push-ups, which I thought was the hardest part, but then I realised, "Oh my God, I have 1,000 squats to do in three days." My legs were so wobbly that I thought if I had to go up on stage I was gonna have spaghetti legs and collapse. But I did it. I *did* it. And I'd let everybody know I was doing it, so that there's pressure. So the morning of the Oscars, I was texting Mikey's reps, saying, "I finished my squats, everybody! It's going to be a good day!"

ANORA IS OUT NOW ON CRITERION COLLECTION 4K UHD AND BLU-RAY

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse

THE SPIDER-MAN MOVIE THAT CHANGED ANIMATION

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

"*ANOTHER* SPIDER-MAN movie? Ugh!"

If that was your reaction upon hearing the announcement, back in 2015, that Sony was making *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse*, you could be forgiven. And you weren't alone. Just the year before, in 2014, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* — the fifth live-action Spider-Man movie in just 12 years — had proved to be anything but. The last thing the world needed now, it seemed, was a new webslinger adventure. Never mind that it was an animated movie, or that the entirely excellent Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, the kings of the project that should not work but somehow does, were behind it. Our collective Spidey-Sense started tingling.

And was wrong. Very wrong. When *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse* finally debuted on the big screen three years later, it swung into a changed world. In the live-action arena, Marvel Studios had partnered with Sony to bring Peter Parker — now played not by Tobey Maguire or Andrew Garfield, but Tom Holland — into the MCU in *Captain America: Civil War*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and *Avengers: Infinity War*. If anything, the overwhelming success of the MCU Spidey seemed to make *Into The Spider-Verse* feel even more redundant. And yet, thanks to its focus on the new Spider-Man-to-be — Miles Morales — and some ingenious visual storytelling, *Into The Spider-Verse* was not just a surprise, or a breath of fresh air. It was a genuine game-changer for the character, the superhero genre, and the animation industry.

Mainstream American animation had, by that point, become homogenised to the point of humdrum. Pixar movies looked like DreamWorks movies, which looked like Blue Sky movies, which looked like Illumination movies, which looked like Disney movies, which looked like Sony Animation movies, which looked like Pixar movies. *Into The Spider-Verse* — itself a Sony Pictures Animation movie — changed all that, with Lord and Miller, whose backgrounds were in animation, leading the way.

Blending 2D with 3D images, the unorthodox 'hand-drawn images over CGI' approach gives us something we had never seen before. Colourful and vibrant, the film — directed by Peter Ramsey, Bob Persichetti, and Rodney Rothman, who shared screenplay duties with Lord — fully embraces its comic-book origins, complete with thought bubbles, onomatopoeic action words on screen, and the Spider-Sense squiggles. "Every frame is a painting" is a cliché, but here that is true. If you put up a picture every time you paused *Into The Spider-Verse* at a random point and found something worthy of hanging on your wall, you'd soon run out of wall. It's an all-you-can-see buffet for the eyes that drives the entire medium forward with one quick *thwip*.

The impact at the box office wasn't that seismic. It made just under $400 million, comfortably the lowest-grossing Spider-Man movie to date. But its critical reception was overwhelmingly positive, and its impact upon the industry profound. Here was a friendly neighbourhood envelope-pusher, a movie that showed the way ahead for animation. When it won the Best Animated Feature at the 2019 Oscars (beating out movies from Pixar and Disney, among others), it seemed to act as a green light for other studios to experiment with the medium. Since then, its influence can be clearly seen in the likes of *The Mitchells Vs The Machines* (another Lord & Miller production), *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem*, all of which put their own spin on the blend of 3D and hand-drawn techniques that *Spider-Verse* pioneered. Animation is at its most exciting point in decades. Maybe even ever.

Yet, even taking into account the excellent 2023 sequel, *Across The Spider-Verse*, *Into The Spider-Verse* remains the high-water mark. Both a love letter and exciting new addition to the character's legacy, it distils all the core tenets of its titular hero — his hope, optimism, humour — into one fresh package. Against the odds, it made the wallcrawler feel original again. It did so by veering away from Peter Parker. Not that Parker isn't present in *Into The Spider-Verse*. On the contrary, by taking advantage of the multiverse's storytelling potential before the MCU deployed it, *Into The Spider-Verse* picks a peck of Peter Parkers, from Chris Pine's noble, doomed take on the character to Jake Johnson's schlub, with all kinds of variants (Nic Cage's growling Spider-Man Noir; Kimiko Glenn's perky Peni Parker; John Mulaney's droll pig version, Spider-Ham) in-between.

At its heart, though, is the idea that anyone can wear the mask, *anyone* can be a hero, something that's embodied by Miles (Shameik Moore), an Afro-Latino kid who does not shy away from his culture. Small moments are smartly peppered throughout the film, such as an early scene that sees Miles, getting ready for school, switching from English to Spanish as he speaks to his mother. Awkward, raw but immensely likeable, Miles' journey to becoming his world's Spider-Man also represents that still-too-rare thing: the elevation of a person of colour as a superhero. Being Spider-Man has always been relatable when he's in costume. Now a whole other demographic of young and adult superhero fans can feel the same way out of costume too. It's just one more thing that makes this movie special.

All of these approaches — the trailblazing visual aesthetic, the focus on Miles, the

Clockwise from main: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) swings into action; Joined by Spidey pals Peni (Kimiko Glenn), Spider-Gwen (Hailee Steinfeld), Spider-Ham (John Mulaney), Peter Parker (Jake Johnson) and Spider-Man Noir (Nicolas Cage); Miles in his civvies; Peter takes on the Green Goblin (Jorma Taccone). **Below right:** Patrick Swayze.

Imago, Sony

emphasis on character and heart — culminate in the film's signature sequence, as the morose Miles, at his lowest ebb, gathers the courage and confidence to take a leap of faith. Literally, as he dives off the top of a New York skyscraper and finds himself on the way down. Or up. Because as he does so, the camera inverts, and suddenly Miles' plunge — soundtracked by a thrilling combination of Blackway & Black Caviar's 'What's Up Danger' and Daniel Pemberton's soaring, boundlessly inventive score — becomes a goosebump-inducing rise. "You had the power within you all along" is as pat a message as "with great power comes great responsibility", but the way in which it's visualised here is utterly breathtaking. On one level, *Into The Spider-Verse* is about Miles learning how to be Spider-Man, but it's also about him embracing his responsibility to overcome his insecurities and achieve his full potential. Once he does, Miles' Spider-Man is completely in tune with himself, leaping, webslinging and whooping with a flair and a style that's completely his own. Much like the movie. Can a film less than ten years old truly be considered a masterpiece? The answer is yes, in this or any other Spider-verse you care to name.

***SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 SATURDAY NIGHT

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

Jason Reitman's breathless, real-time, print-the-legend version of what happened in the 90 minutes before the launch of the first episode of *Saturday Night Live* is enormously entertaining, with an excellent ensemble cast breathing sparky life into comedy icons.

2 SEPTEMBER 5

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

An interesting companion piece to Spielberg's *Munich* and Kevin Macdonald's documentary *One Day In September*, Tim Fehlbaum's movie tells the story of the terrorist attack on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics from the POV of the sports journalists covering the story. It would make for an interesting double bill with *Saturday Night*: tonally wildly different, but the same rough energy, and one heck of a cast.

3 JASON GOES TO HELL: THE FINAL FRIDAY

(OUT 19 MAY, 4K BR)

The ninth *Friday The 13th* movie, and second to have the word "final" in the title (neither of which turned out to be that) is a fun body-swap slasher which bucked, even just a little, the franchise's law of diminishing returns.

4 THRONE OF BLOOD

(OUT 19 MAY, BR/4K BR)

Jason Voorhees has got nothing on Macbeth when it comes to murder. Or, in Akira Kurosawa's bold retelling of the tale, Washizu (Toshirô Mifune) — the name here of the general driven mad by guilt. One of Kurosawa's best. Shakespeare would be proud.

5 ROAD HOUSE

(OUT 2 JUNE, BR/4K BR)

The Bard never wrote a line like "Pain don't hurt", mind. Kudos to David Lee Henry and Hilary Henkin for doing that for Rowdy Herrington's sleazy action movie, and props to Patrick Swayze for delivering it, as well as a ton of roundhouse kicks and throat rips. A minor classic of its kind.

Time Capsule

James Mangold

THE *A COMPLETE UNKNOWN* DIRECTOR ON A LIFE IN MOVIES

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

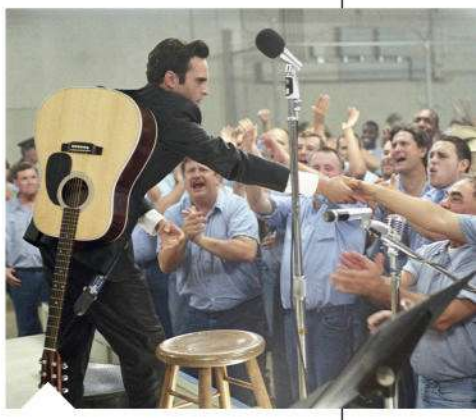
JAMES MANGOLD HAS been making man gold for quite some time. It's been three decades since his first movie, *Heavy*, and on the eve of the sofaplex debut of his latest, *A Complete Unknown*, it's the perfect time for *Empire* to show him pictures from pretty much everything he's made since. "It's fun to watch all these movies, but also to just visit moments in them," he says. "Each one represents a year or two, or more, in my life. This was lovely." Let the Mangold rush commence.

ON THE RECORD
A COMPLETE UNKNOWN (2024)

"I remember this day. It was our first day in a set we built, a recreation of Studio A at Columbia Records in New York. It was where Bob [Dylan] played and recorded almost all of his first six or seven albums. The first thing we were doing — you can't see it so much in this picture, but you can in the scene — is that we were looking at stills from these sessions, and we had arranged all the mic stands in this herringbone pattern, because they had this ridiculous number of boom-mic stands at Columbia. We got as many stands as we could find in the tri-state area. This was mid-shoot. At this point it was pretty much a foregone conclusion that Timmy [Chalamet] was doing everything live. He was so good, we just kept on pushing playback tracks aside and letting him lay it down live."

DON'T LOOK UP
KATE & LEOPOLD (2001)

"This is the year 2000, and that's a young Meg Ryan and a young Hugh Jackman walking down Midtown Manhattan. Hugh is beholding the buildings. He's a duke from 1876, so New York has moved from what Scorsese envisioned in *The Age Of Innocence* into this monumental world of concrete canyons. I remember being on the streets with them. Making a movie in New York is always a bit of a journey with crowd control, and this was right at the time Meg had just gotten divorced. It was a pretty zany time on the PR side of this film."



FOLSOM PRISON BLUES
WALK THE LINE (2005)

"This was a big day. This was shooting Joaquin [Phoenix] doing 'Folsom Prison...'. We were in a warehouse in the Memphis area, and I remember how great the extras were. You can really see it in this picture. These are all locals dressed as convicts, and what a great bunch of faces. They were giving their all. It was raucous. It felt really triumphant too. It all had to be shot in one day, because we couldn't afford them for more than one day. I remember being loaded down with what I had to accomplish, and Joaquin being on fire."

Alamy, Disney, Imago

GUITAR, INTERRUPTED
GIRL, INTERRUPTED (1999)

"This is a hallway in a real Harrisburg, Pennsylvania mental institution. We took over an abandoned building and redressed it. And this is, of course, a very young Angelina [Jolie] and Winona [Ryder], serenading Elisabeth Moss. 'Downtown' [by Petula Clark] is a song that was on the radio in my childhood. This movie, like a ridiculous number I've made, takes place in the late '60s, and I thought it was incongruous in the sense that I didn't want Winona singing a powerful song of meaning and freedom. I wanted a pop tune that was so contradictory to the grim setting we were in."

"YOU BLEW IT!"
COP LAND (1997)

"This is a very young me between Bob De Niro and Sly Stallone in what were the old *New York Post* offices in downtown Manhattan, redressed as One Police Plaza. I had written this scene — the, 'You blew it!' scene — and it wasn't working. It just felt like 'blah blah blah', two people talking at each other. I always feel a scene needs some kind of triangle, some kind of other agenda besides the obvious one. I kept them both over lunch to try and figure it out, and Bob ordered a sandwich brought to the set. As we were rehearsing, he opened the sandwich and noticed they'd put the wrong mayo on, or something. And he had to wipe whatever he didn't like off the bread. He did that as Sly was talking, and it was seeing Bob being more involved in his sandwich than he was in the local sheriff that changed the complexion of the whole scene. So I ordered up dozens of sandwiches."

RUN, INDY, RUN!
INDIANA JONES AND THE DIAL OF DESTINY (2023)

"This is on the backlot at Pinewood, because we had horse action we wanted to do. And we ran out of time in Glasgow, and had to gather it later. So this is pretty late on in the show, on a parking lot at Pinewood. We had set up there, and there were a couple of structures we dressed as shops. I was a little limited in my angles, but it was amazing. I would always joke with Harrison [Ford], when he wasn't dressed as Indy and runs, it's like *Clear And Present Danger*. It instantly becomes another movie without that hat or whip. But for me, forcing an iconic character into this modern context and seeing them having to contend with how the world has changed around them is perennially interesting."

THE X-FACTOR
LOGAN (2017)

"This day was one of the turning-points of making that movie. It was the first day that Dafne's [Keen] character, who spoke Spanish, spoke. I had worked with Dafne and Hugh in rehearsals, of course, but it was one of those days where you feel the movie change under you. You feel it in the way the crew is acting, because they've been making this movie and they think it's pretty good. But what happened with Dafne, and the quality of her vibe with Hugh in this scene, changed everyone around me, and changed the complexion of the entire movie. (***Empire:*** *"Why are you bunching your fist?"*) I'm showing her how hard I want her to hit him!"

AND THEN THERE WERE FOUR
IDENTITY (2003)

"I loved shooting *Identity*. We built that whole hotel on the Esther Williams soundstage on the Columbia Pictures lot. The reason being, she made all these swimming musicals in the '40s and they had tanks underneath the stage. We were raining on the set from giant shower bars all day. So we built basically the world's largest shower stall on this stage. It was a very transformative experience. I remember Johnny Cash visited the set not [long] after we shot this scene, because that [*Walk The Line*] was the next movie I made. I had somehow gotten more relaxed in the job, by making movies that were never going to be *Citizen Kane*, and returning to a more ambitious project with *Walk The Line*, I had gotten a kind of new sense of bearings."

A COMPLETE UNKNOWN **IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+**

The Ranking

Werewolf movies

WE USED TO RANK WEREWOLF MOVIES. WE'RE ALRIGHT NOWWWWWW...

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

Marco Vittur

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
A naked American man stole his balloons.

BECKY DARKE
She will not be threatened by a walking meatloaf.

JAMIE GRAHAM
Keeps to the road. Stays clear of the moors.

MIKE MUNCER
Loves to go for a pint in The Slaughtered Lamb.

Chris: So, werewolf movies then.
Becky: I've watched nothing else for a week, and have had the most fun.
Mike: I think they're at their most interesting as metaphors. There are so many that explore coming of age and puberty and bodily changes, and then ones like *Late Phases*, where it's the other end of life and your faculties are going.
Chris: It's a genre you can trace back to an origin movie, 1935's *Werewolf Of London*. A-wooooooooo.
Mike: I loved this. Such a charming, fun film. It's lovely and short as well. And it's really interesting what they do with the mythology.
Jamie: Being a Universal movie, it looks great. I don't think it's anywhere near the class of *Frankenstein* or *The Invisible Man* or *Bride Of Frankenstein*, but it's a really fun movie. And it introduced the idea of the tormented hero turning into a werewolf, and moonlight, and the bipedal werewolf.
Chris: But does it deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as *The Wolf Man*, which came six years later?
Becky: I think *The Wolf Man* is a better picture, yeah. I know that a lot of people don't love Lon Chaney Jr.
Chris: Who are these people? Bring them to me. Without him, I don't think it merits classic status.
Becky: I think he's great, and the Jack Pierce make-up is great. He's cute, but also very vicious.
Chris: There were a bunch of sequels with Chaney as Larry Talbot, including the comedy *Abbott And Costello Meet Frankenstein*.
Becky: I loved it. I don't think I'd ever seen an Abbott and Costello film before. Now I'm like, "Sign me up."
Chris: Interestingly, a clip from that movie is used in John Landis' *Into The Night*. Which came out four years after Landis made *An American Werewolf In London*.
Mike: That's *the* film, isn't it? It's the one all other werewolf films get compared to. It has amazing character moments, the comedy/horror balance, and that incredible, Oscar-winning Rick Baker transformation.
Jamie: It's in the bright light, not hiding anything. That's what makes it amazing. You feel the pain. David Naughton really sells it as well. You can hear everything cracking.
Chris: What Rick Baker did is still, somehow, 44 years on, the gold standard.
Becky: And it's so perfectly balanced with the performance. It's never been beaten.
Jamie: And the movie is genuinely disturbing to this day. It's funny and scary and tragic.
Chris: *American Werewolf* is close to being a perfect movie for me. It doesn't put a foot wrong. I don't think a lot of werewolf movies are scary. This is scary.
Jamie: For me, no other werewolf movie even gets close.
Chris: At the same time, Joe Dante was beavering away on *The Howling*, which is in many ways just as important.
Mike: I really admire its ambition. It's doing about 50 things at once. Some of it is a bit clunky around the edges, but it's more interesting than a lot of other werewolf movies.
Jamie: The transformation is obviously amazing. There's a lot of debate as to which is the best transformation from 1981.
Becky: There's no debate. The transformation isn't that good.
Jamie: The mechanical snout is really impressive, the way it elongates.
Becky: It's so ropey.
Chris: Rob Bottin is a genius, but come on, it's not better than *American Werewolf*. But we've had such an onslaught of digital transformations. I prefer it when you can sense the hand of an effects artist. Look at *Late Phases*, where the werewolf literally rips his skin apart. That's such a cool idea.
Jamie: You've got it in *The Company Of Wolves* as well. The idea of a hairy beast on the inside.
Mike: I can see why you might argue that *Company Of Wolves* doesn't feel like a werewolf movie.
Chris: In 1981 we also had *Wolfen*, which like *Company Of Wolves* is slightly bending the rules of what a werewolf movie is. But it's an effective mood-piece.
Mike: I prefer werewolf movies that are slightly werewolf-adjacent. *Wolfen* is one of my favourites. It's a sleazy, gritty, New York serial-killer movie.
Jamie: It's got such interesting themes, about gentrification and the treatment of Native Americans.
Chris: Speaking of interesting themes, what about Leigh

Whannell's new *Wolf Man*?
Mike: I'm more positive on it than others. I thought it was a really interesting character study, and there are some genuinely scary set-pieces, particularly in the first hour or so. But it does feel very slight.
Jamie: I enjoyed the first hour. In the last act it didn't really know where to go.
Chris: I don't think it was quite as ingenious a take on the material as Whannell's *The Invisible Man*. But what he did with the mythology was really interesting. He treats it more as an infection, and it's about decay and degeneration.
Becky: Is it going to be on people's werewolf rankings in 20 years? I'm not sure it would be on mine.
Chris: There haven't been that many British werewolf movies. There's the likes of *The Curse Of The Werewolf*, which is the only Hammer werewolf movie, and *The Beast Must Die*, from 1974. It's begging for a remake. It's about a big-game hunter who assembles a group of friends in a country house and tells them one of them is a werewolf. And it has a 'werewolf break' about 20 minutes from the end, where you can guess who the werewolf is.
Mike: That's what *The Brutalist* needed.
Chris: It's so kitsch and silly. I loved it.
Becky: It's basically *Cujo* meets *Clue*. It's crazy.
Chris: Where do we stand on Neil Marshall's *Dog Soldiers*?
Becky: *American Werewolf In London* is a perfect film. But...
Chris: This is more perfect?
Becky: This has Sean Pertwee throwing Molotov cocktails and saying things like, "If Little Red Riding Hood should show up with a bazooka and a bad attitude, I expect you to chin the bitch!" And the wolves are scary!
Mike: It's a brilliant film. And funny as well. Really funny. There's some nasty gore in it that has always stayed with me.
Becky: it's one of my favourite films of all time.
Chris: It came out at the start of the 21st century, as did another movie that came out of Canada and kind of redefined the werewolf genre. I'm talking about the prequel to *Ginger Snaps 2*.
Jamie: *Ginger Snaps* is just a great teen movie, isn't it? It's got all the angst, and all the dialogue is like *Clueless* or *Heathers*. It's a genius idea. I can't believe someone didn't do it before, tie in the lunar cycle with the menstrual cycle.
Becky: We've talked so much about transformations and metaphors, and then *Ginger Snaps* comes along and goes, "This is what it feels like to be a teenage girl." I was 18 in the year 2000 and I was like, "Yeah, fucking sucks!"
Mike: It rivals *Carrie* as the one of the best female coming-of-age horror stories. It's a very visceral film. You can almost smell this film, and in a really good way. That's what the best werewolf movies should be. Visceral and animalistic.
Chris: It's the best teen wolf-movie since *Teen Wolf*, which came out in 1985, when I thought Michael J. Fox was the coolest man on the planet. Still is, of course. But *Teen Wolf* is so cuddly, I didn't really consider it for this list.
Jamie: It's more of an '80s high-school sports movie. *Teen Wolf Too* is terrible.
Chris: It was 1985's big wolf on campus. But also that year we got *Silver Bullet*, based on Stephen King's *Cycle Of The Werewolf*, which features the late Corey Haim in a wheelchair that can do about 60 miles per hour.
Mike: It's fun. It's the most Stephen King to have ever Stephen Kinged.
Becky: But there's also an incredible opening decapitation.
Chris: There's strong *Lost Boys* energy in this as they prepare for the final showdown. And with a werewolf, you have ages to prepare for the full moon. Which plays out neatly in *Late Phases*, which is absolutely terrific.
Jamie: There's not a lot of werewolf action in that film, but when it comes, it's big time.
Becky: Nick Damici is great in it. He's like the love child of Charles Bronson and Paul Newman.
Chris: Okay, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?
WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
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THE TOP TEN

1.
AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON (1981)

2.
GINGER SNAPS (2000)

3.
DOG SOLDIERS (2002)

4.
THE HOWLING (1981)

5.
SILVER BULLET (1985)

6.
THE WOLF MAN (1941)

7.
THE COMPANY OF WOLVES (1984)

8.
LATE PHASES (2014)

9.
WOLFEN (1981)

10.
WOLF MAN (2025)

SPOILER SPECIAL

The Electric State

THE RUSSO BROTHERS ON THE KEY MOMENTS OF THEIR ROBOT EPIC

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE ELECTRIC STATE, the third (and, for the time being, last) post-MCU movie from Joe and Anthony Russo, is a heartfelt and often deeply unconventional (even downright weird) movie set in a world where sentient robots have been exiled from humanity after a bitter war. "We wanted to make a film that challenged a younger audience," says Joe Russo. "The tone is broad-appeal: it's meant to invite as many people under the tent as possible. And hopefully there are ideas in it you can have a conversation about afterward. One of which is death, another is technology and its impact on our collective mental health." Here, *Empire* has a conversation with the Russos about the crucial beats from their movie.

FAMILY REUNION

At its heart, *The Electric State* is about the relationship between a protective older sister (Millie Bobby Brown's Michelle) and her genius brother Christopher (Woody Norman). Except there's a big twist: Christopher is clinically dead, and his brainwaves are being used by technocrat Ethan Skate (Stanley Tucci) to power the revolutionary tech that ended the human-robot war and has effectively ensnared most of humanity in the warm cocoon of a virtual world. But Christopher has found a way to smuggle his consciousness into the body of a robot called Kid Cosmo. In an early scene, the two reunite. "We love the fact that Michelle is looking for some form of very personal human connection through this figure," says Anthony Russo. "There is a beauty and a hopefulness in technology." Cosmo's limited lexicon (he says things like, "There's trouble on the moon!") is provided by the voice of Alan Tudyk. "In the original version of the movie, he didn't speak at all," adds Anthony.

SKATE STATES HIS CASE

Tucci's Skate is an intriguing villain, one who's introduced trying to reconnect with his mother in a simulacrum of his childhood. Yet his true nature comes out in an exchange with Giancarlo Esposito's Colonel Bradbury, where he displays messianic tendencies and describes the world as "a tyre fire floating on an ocean of piss". "That's a Chris Markus line," says Joe, citing one of *The Electric State*'s two writers (Stephen McFeely being the other). "We wanted a completely disillusioned asshole who was really driving this innovation in tech. There's a certain sociopathy that is pervasive in advancement, and a certain personality type seems to constantly emerge in that space, which is why it's dangerous when it's in control of things other than companies." Any similarity to tech billionaires living or dead is very much coincidental, we're sure.

JOURNEY BEGINS

After connecting with a cabal of friendly robots, including Woody Harrelson's Mr. Peanut, a giant version of the famous Planters (an American snack-food company) symbol, Michelle and Chris Pratt's ex-soldier-turned-smuggler Keats vow to lead an uprising against Skate and his company, Sentre. And they begin their journey into battle accompanied by Journey, as a piano-playing robot called Taco blasts out the opening bars of 'Don't Stop Believing', which then subtly segues into an orchestrated version overseen by the film's composer, Alan Silvestri. "Taco was a post [production] idea," Joe explains. "'We've got Silvestri, one of the best to ever do it. Shall we let him take over some of these cues?'" Including, of all songs, Oasis' 'Wonderwall' near the climax. "It was his idea to turn 'Wonderwall' into the finale piece." Mad fer it.

BETTER CALL BARRY

The film's big third-act set-piece is an assault by the small robot army on Sentre's Seattle HQ, in an attempt to overthrow Skate's global dominance, and to find a way to reconnect Christopher's consciousness with his human body. Amid all the oilshed, there's one absolutely corking Easter egg, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it billboard advertising the legal services of one Barry Zuckerkorn. Otherwise known as the incompetent lawyer played by Henry Winkler in *Arrested Development*, the pilot for which was directed by the Russos. "That might have been straight off a billboard from A*rrested Development*," laughs Joe. "It might be that old." Which might explain why it's advertising a website (www.barrygood.biz) that wasn't working last time *Empire* checked. "Now we've got to run out and tell somebody to put that up," adds Joe. "We didn't do it right!"

A BIG DECISION

Convention teaches us that a movie like this will end in triumph, with Michelle and Christopher defeating the bad guys, and figuring out a way to save his body. But that doesn't happen. Instead, Christopher — aware that his body is beyond repair — asks Michelle to let him die, which she does in a deeply affecting scene. "Christopher is basically lost," says Anthony. "You can think of it as a metaphor for a young person's experience with digital technology. They can become consumed by it. And maybe there's no way to get out."

LEAVE NO HERMAN BEHIND

Shortly after that, Herman — Keats' robot friend — also dies, on the battlefield. But the Russos were well aware that ending the film with two gut punches might have been one too many, hence his miraculous resurrection in a new, smaller body. "We have two primary relationships in the movie," adds Anthony. "You have Michelle and Cosmo-slash-Christopher, and you have Keats and Herman. We did a version where we were like, 'Oh God, we're killing Christopher and we're killing Herman!' This doesn't feel right!" Joe adds, with a smile, "You want to make sure that people don't want to walk into traffic at the end of the film."

ON REFLECTION

The film's final shot is of a dog lapping up water from a puddle, in the junkyard where the Kid Cosmo robot has been taken to its final resting place. Well, maybe not so final. For the last thing we see, reflected in the water, is that robot rising up above the dog. It raises all kinds of questions — specifically, has Christopher, even after death, found a way to truly transfer his consciousness into a robotic form? The Russos remain coy. "That's why we did it as a reflection, because it could be interpreted as, 'Did it really happen, did it not really happen?'" says Joe. "Even if it did, what does it mean? He's still a robot. It's not really her brother. But you want to give people a sense of hope. I think it's neutral to optimistic, the ending."

***THE ELECTRIC STATE* IS ON NETFLIX NOW**

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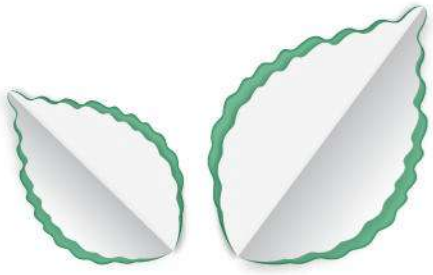

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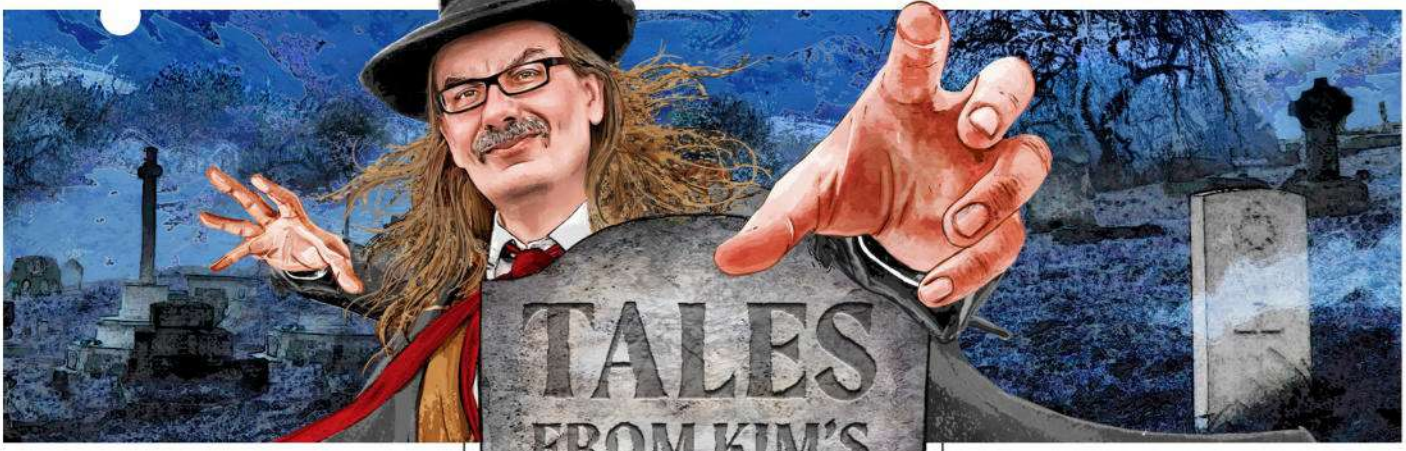


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

AN INTRODUCTION TO INDONESIAN HORROR

ACCORDING TO THE documentary *Suzzanna: Queen Of Black Magic*, 60 per cent of Indonesian films in the 1980s were horror. Regimes and fashions have changed in the 17,500-island archipelago since then, but horror is still a huge part of a busy national cinema. In the video-tape era, a few Indonesian items like the truly strange *Lady Terminator* and muscleman epic *The Warrior* circulated in English dubs and grotty transfers. Only now are we seeing quality international releases for 1980s highlights alongside the best contemporary work.

Indonesian horror takes cues from Western and Japanese (even Bollywood) traditions but is informed by the complex religious-ethnic make-up of the nation. A host of local ghosts, monsters, gods, beliefs and creatures (often reptilian) feature in place of vampires, werewolves and demons. Islam often takes the role Catholicism does in Western horror, with Imams invoking Allah to dispel monsters from pre-Islamic belief systems... but there's a subversive sense that some human villains are so vile, people will risk invoking black magic to get anything like justice.

It's a huge field, so here are the major players:

• Sisworo Gautama Putra. After *Satan's Slave* (1980), a breakout hit about a household haunted and cursed for adopting a secular lifestyle, Putra became the go-to horror director. His style mixes extreme guts and gore with slapstick comedy and last-reel sermonising — ideal for the village pop-up cinemas which were the local equivalents of drive-ins or grindhouses.

• Suzzanna. In 1981, Putra directed *Sundel Bolong* (*Ghost With A Hole*), starring former child actor Suzanna — who, with an extra 'z' to her billing, became, in films like *Queen Of Black Magic*, the great star of Indo-horror. Suzzanna perfected her signature role of tragic innocent, victim of all manner of abuse, who typically turns to a dark shaman and manifests as a ghost-witch-monster to avenge herself on her persecutors. In *Sundel Bolong*, she becomes a hungry spectre with a maggot-infested hole in her lower back, and is compelled to eat a 200-skewer satay feast at a roadside stall between visiting gruesome justice on a gang of pimps and procuers. Suzzanna was so regal — known for her hard stare — that she was eventually cast as medusa-coiffed undersea god Nyi Blorong in the more fantastical, sexy *The Snake Queen* and *The Hungry Snake Woman*.

Suzzanna is such a huge presence that when *Sundel Bolong* was remade in 2018 it became *Suzzanna: Buried Alive*, in which the late actor is invoked as if she were a supernatural being.

• Joko Anwar. The heir to Sisworo Gautama Putra, Anwar is so devoted to 1980s Indo-horror that he's directed revisionist remakes of *Satan's Slave* and *Queen Of Black Magic*. His all-new hit *Impetigore* (2019) — a folk-horror story involving shadow-puppets and a curse on an isolated village — is the best place to start. A brand-name filmmaker, he's also directed the adventures of Indonesian comic-book superhero Gundala and has his own series (*Nightmares And Daydreams*) on Netflix.

Top: Demonic moments in *Satan's Slave*. **Above:** Monday-morning vibes in *Sundel Bolong*, aka *Ghost With A Hole*.

CRYPT KEEPERS

KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

THE BABY IN THE BASKET

(DIGITAL)

A baby left at a Scots convent during World War II is taken in by nuns, but has disturbing attributes — hooves, horns and evil telekinesis. Owing more to *Black Narcissus* than *The Omen*, Andy Crane and Nathan Shepka's British horror is clearly inexpensive but ambitious and unusual.

BLACKWATER LANE

(DIGITAL)

Minka Kelly, who lives in a Norfolk mansion, worries that she's either a) being haunted, b) targeted by a murderer, c) has early-onset dementia and *is* the murderer, or d) being plotted against. Husband Dermot Mulroney is away with flimsy excuses when anything scary happens. Lush-looking if thin.

PROJECT SILENCE

(DVD/BLU-RAY/4K)

The pitch: *Train To Busan*, but with a long bridge cut off by fog and a multi-vehicle pile-up instead of a train to cover the disaster-movie angle and genetically engineered attack dogs instead of zombies for the horror. A government spin-doctor grows a spine and fights to save his daughter.

A SAMURAI IN TIME

(BLU-RAY)

Lightning-struck swordsman Makiya Yamaguchi is zapped through time and finds work as a stuntman in a *samurai* soap opera. A contemplative, affecting study of a hero out of time forced to cope with the fact that history says his side lost badly. A major box-office hit in Japan.

THE STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL & MR HYDE

(DIGITAL)

Directed for Sky Arts by Hope Dickson Leach in 2022, this National Theatre of Scotland production sets the story in a dark, dangerous Edinburgh and plays up the gay subtext while involving its dual villain (Henry Pettigrew) in Victorian civic corruption.

STORY OF THE SHOT

Wayne's World

THE 'BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY' HEADBANG-A-LONG. *MAMMA MIA*!

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE ORIGIN

Wayne Campbell (Mike Myers), his best friend Garth Algar (Dana Carvey) and three of their chums are driving through Aurora, Illinois, at night. "I think we'll go with a little 'Bohemian Rhapsody', gentlemen?" says Wayne, popping a cassette (ask your grandparents) into the stereo. As Queen's mid-1970s hit blasts out of the speakers, they all sing along in their finest falsettos. Eventually it gets to Brian May's crunching guitar solo, at which point the fab five headbang in unison to the music, and that's when *Wayne's World* became a cultural phenomenon. It's a moment Myers — who also wrote *Wayne's World* — pulled from his teenage years growing up in Toronto. "At one point I said, 'I don't want to make this movie if it's not 'Bohemian Rhapsody'," he has recalled.

The headbanging, though, came later, according to the film's director, Penelope Spheeris. "That was not in the script," she tells *Empire*. "All he did was say, 'We are listening to 'Bohemian Rhapsody'.' It's not like he said, 'And then at the break we're going to start banging our heads really bad.'" Spheeris says she took inspiration from, well, herself. A couple of years earlier, she had directed a film called *Dudes* in which Jon Cryer, Daniel Roebuck and, of all people, Flea (from the Red Hot Chili Peppers) drive around in a car singing 'Hava Nagila'... and then start headbanging. "That's where the seed of this scene came from," Spheeris tells *Empire*. "I knew it worked because it worked so well in that movie."

THE SHOOT

Spheeris captured the sequence on a schwing and a prayer, over the course of "one long night in a suburb of LA [generally thought to be West Covina], the only place where we could have a long stretch of street close down overnight." (The insert shots of various Aurora establishments that Wayne and Garth drive past were added later, by the second unit.) She recalls asking the actors, who were actually being pulled along on a trailer flatbed, to perform the song in full several times, to give her plenty of options in the edit. "It was big-time coverage," she says. But that gave her cast sore necks. "It was so difficult shooting it, because the guys hadn't seen the scene with Flea and Jon Cryer," she laughs.

A24, Getty Images

INSTANT TRIVIA

1
The Mirthmobile was actually a 1976 AMC Pacer.

2
'Bohemian Rhapsody' was the only choice. Spheeris flat-out denies rumours she wanted to go with a Guns N' Roses track.

3
Carvey manages to get some of the words wrong as the guys sing along. He later admitted he couldn't remember the lyrics. "It was a big decision to keep that shot in," says Spheeris.

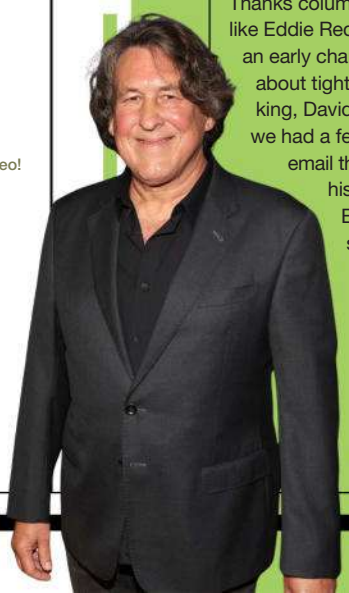
4
Myers pops up in the Queen/Mercury movie *Bohemian Rhapsody*, as a record company exec extolling the virtues of their song 'I Love My Car'. "That's the kind of song teenagers can crank up the volume in their car and bang their heads to," he says. "'Bohemian Rhapsody' will never be that song."

"They just thought I was nuts. They were totally sick of it. They thought I was just torturing them." It worked out nicely, though. "When we had the test screening in Westwood, I couldn't believe the audience was going so crazy," she recalls. "It makes people so joyous for some reason."

THE LEGACY

"There are so many derivations of that scene now, I think people don't even realise," says Spheeris. "James Corden, for example. Where the hell did he get going around singing in a car? I can't put a copyright on it." As for Queen, *Wayne's World* opened in 1992, just a few months after the death of Freddie Mercury, and seemed to fill the Queen-shaped hole in the hearts of millions. By a strange quirk of fate, it was also the first time a young boy called Adam Lambert had ever heard the band. He's now, essentially, Queen's lead singer. No way? Way.

***WAYNE'S WORLD* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**



Main: "Galileo! Galileo! Galileo!" **Right:** Cameron Crowe.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

CAMERON CROWE

HERETIC CO-DIRECTOR SCOTT BECK ON HOW THE DIRECTOR NEARLY APPEARED IN THEIR MOVIE

IT'S BEEN A while since Cameron Crowe has graced the big screen — his last movie as director, *Aloha*, was ten years ago. But if Scott Beck and Bryan Woods had had their druthers, *Heretic* would have marked Crowe's return. But this time, in front of the camera. Not as the film's villain, Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant had that one sewn up), but as a Mormon, going door to door. "Cameron read a draft of the script," says Beck. "We were trying to coerce him into doing a small cameo, because when he was making *Jerry Maguire*, he originally wanted to get Billy Wilder to do a role." But, just as Wilder said no, so too did Crowe. "He was very, very kind about declining, and not wanting to put himself in front of the camera. And he wrote us an email that we literally printed out and framed on the wall. That bolstered us."

In return, they've given Crowe a place in their packed Special Thanks column on the movie, along with other recognisable names like Eddie Redmayne ("He'd read an early draft of the script and was an early champion for it"), Steven Soderbergh ("He had a few notes about tightening up the last 20 minutes") and Special Thanks king, David Lowery ("He helped us bottle the movie a bit more… we had a few extraneous side tangents in it"). But it was Crowe's email that blew the duo away. "There's one thing we love about his films: there's always something so personal," adds Beck. "*Elizabethtown* is one of our favourites because it speaks so much to the idea of failure, and trying to pick yourself up. Working in this industry, it's constant failure, constant rejection, and there have been many times, even in the last five years, where we thought about hanging up our hats. But Cameron has been one of those voices that just shows you keep going." Sounds like he had them at "hello". **CHRIS HEWITT**

***HERETIC* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

The Knight stuff

EVER-PROLIFIC WRITER **STEVEN KNIGHT** ON HIS MOST ENDURING CHARACTERS

WORDS **JAMES DYER**

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

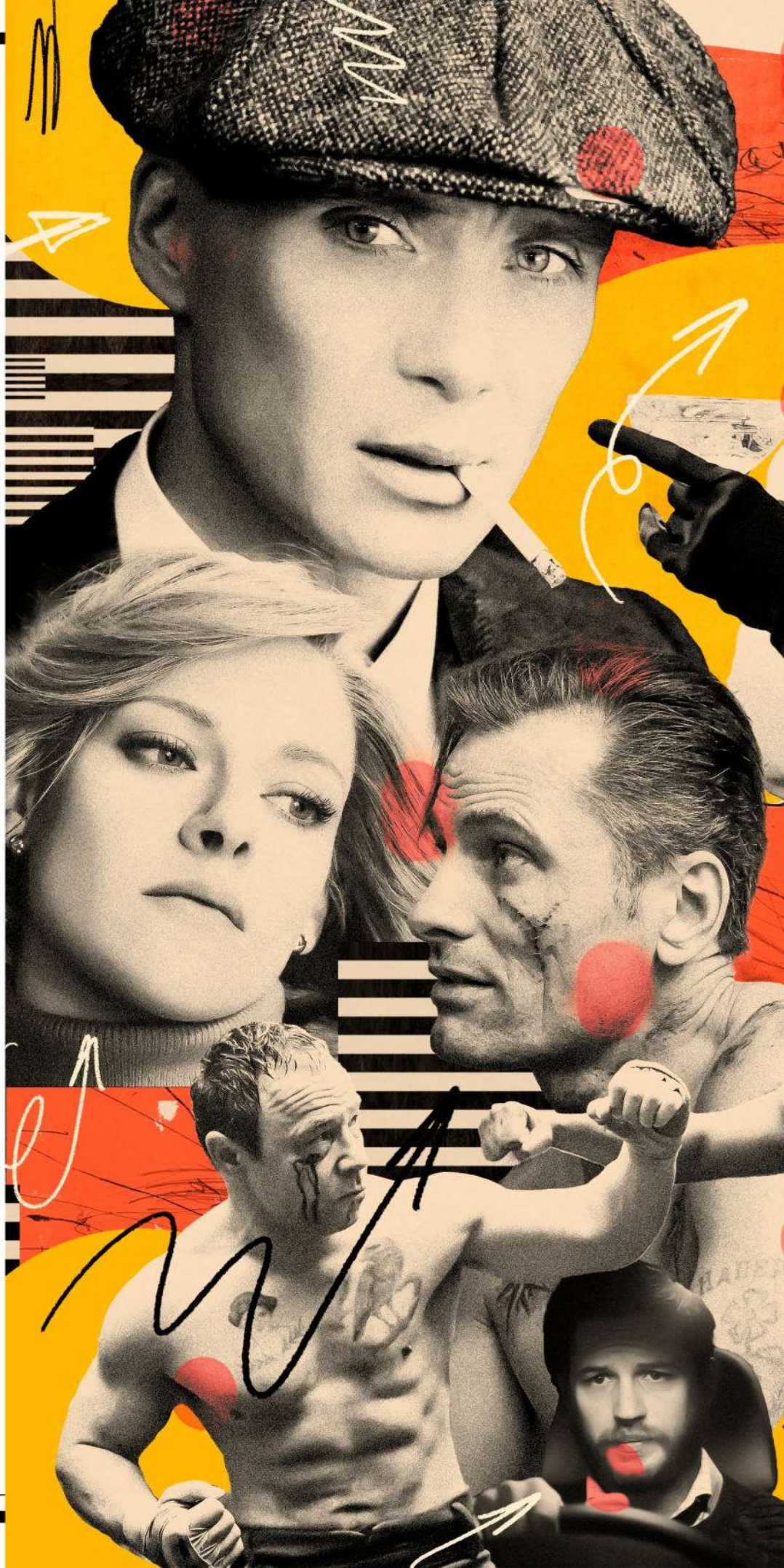
STICK A PIN in the current TV or cinema listings and you have a better than average chance of skewering a project written by Steven Knight. The hugely prolific screenwriter has a hand in everything from operatic biopic *Maria* to the derring-do antics of *SAS: Rogue Heroes* and bare-knuckle brawler *A Thousand Blows*. Over the course of his career, Knight has dabbled in historical drama, post-apocalyptic fantasy and everything in-between, but one thing that's remained constant is the vividness of his characters, be they a Brummie gangster or the people's princess. Here, Knight talks us through the crafting of his marvellous creations.

MARIA CALLAS
ANGELINA JOLIE, *MARIA* (2024)

The most renowned opera singer of the past century, Callas was a larger-than-life figure — one Knight had zero interest in when he set about writing the screenplay for Pablo Larraín's latest. Instead, he set about trying to delve beyond 'La Callas' and tease out the woman beneath the icon. "With people who really existed, I try to avoid the history books," Knight explains. "People's lives are far more chaotic and unpredictable and the only way to capture that is to get first-hand accounts. With Maria, there was a butler, Ferruccio [Mezzadri], who worked for her for 30 years. She kept asking him to move the piano and about feeding the dog. These people you come across in history, they spend 90 per cent of their time just doing dopey, ordinary stuff. That's what's interesting, because it's human."

DIANA SPENCER
KRISTEN STEWART, *SPENCER* (2021)

How do you get under the skin of one of the most famous women of all time? That was the dilemma facing Knight on his first collaboration with Larraín. In the end, Knight managed to track down her chef for a very personal if unexpected take. "With that, you get her relationship with



Left: The work of creative behemoth Steven Knight.
Bottom: The writer-director in Paris in March.

food, like how she'd get up in the night and go into the kitchen to help herself," he says. "Then there are things like when everybody turned up at Sandringham and they were all weighed — a tradition dating back to the 1840s. You were meant to have put on at least 4lb to prove you'd enjoyed yourself. And in walks someone with the relationship to food that Diana had. You wouldn't dare make that up, but that's the way it was."

TOMMY SHELBY
CILLIAN MURPHY, *PEAKY BLINDERS* (2013-)

"Tommy was crafted from stories told to me by my parents who grew up in Small Heath," Knight recalls of arguably his most famous creation, the defining figure of the phenomenally successful *Peaky Blinders*. A World War I veteran with PTSD who returns to Birmingham to lead the infamous street gang, the tweed-clad gangster may also be Knight's most personal character. "My mum was a bookie's runner and my dad's uncles were illegal bookmakers who called themselves 'peaky blinders'," he says. "They came back from the Second World War and were people who didn't express emotion and I thought, 'To write this, what I need to do is someone who won't show emotion [at first] but who you get through to eventually.' Everybody wants to get into a lockbox, and that's what I tried to do with Tommy Shelby."

HEZEKIAH MOSCOW
MALACHI KIRBY, *A THOUSAND BLOWS* (2025)

"No-one would create a character called Hezekiah Moscow, who comes to London in the 1880s to become a lion-tamer and then becomes the heavyweight champion of the world!" laughs Knight of Kirby's role, a real-life figure who makes quite an impact in the recent Disney+ series. While working on *A Thousand Blows*, Knight unearthed an old Victorian photograph of a Black boxer, who turned out to be Moscow. Doing his due diligence, Knight discovered that he was also known as Ching Hook ("His grandmother was Chinese"), and his thinly recorded history proved stranger than fiction. "He's from Jamaica, no-one knows where, but he could have been at Morant Bay during the Morant Bay massacre. So it might be that he's someone who came from a situation where he saw the horrors of that, he lost his father, and then you hook him to Sugar Goodson [Stephen Graham], who we know did lose his father quite horrifically, and try to create a mirror image of those two characters."

NIKOLAI LUZHIN
VIGGO MORTENSEN, *EASTERN PROMISES* (2007)

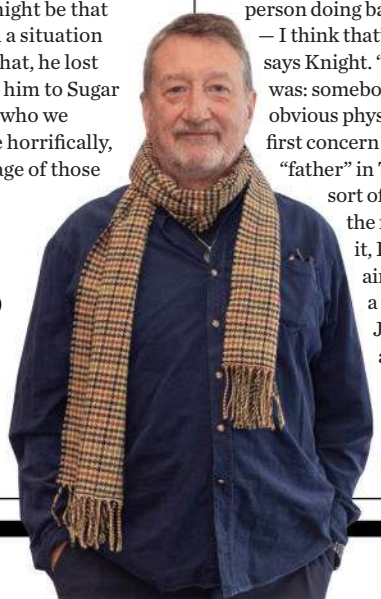
A character we meet trying to defrost a corpse with a hairdryer in David Cronenberg's cracking thriller, Viggo Mortensen's Russian gangster started out as a straight-up heavy, before taking Knight by surprise and turning into something more. "I was writing a scene where he meets a policeman and I just swapped the lines over. I thought, 'Oh God, it's him. He's the policeman.' And then I thought, 'He's been a policeman all along and he's been undercover!' I didn't know he was an undercover policeman until that scene, two-thirds of the way through the script. I thought I'd then have to reverse-engineer the whole thing, but then you think, 'Don't do that.' Because if you didn't know when you were writing it, then the audience won't know either." Promising.

IVAN LOCKE
TOM HARDY, *LOCKE* (2013)

Knight's directorial debut, *Hummingbird*, starring Jason Statham, was a disappointment. "It's exactly what you want it to be on the page," he recalls. "And when it comes into reality, it isn't." Stung by the experience, Knight's reaction was a tightly contained follow-up based around a night-time drive down the M6, with just one character on screen throughout. That character is Tom Hardy's Ivan Locke, a man whose life unravels (and possibly ravels again) while on his way to London. "I thought, 'I'm gonna do this with as few variables as possible so nothing can go wrong or be misinterpreted,'" says Knight. "So I thought of a person in a car and all the other dialogue would be phoned in by people reading from a script." Locke's series of late-night calls with a coterie of guest stars (Olivia Colman, Tom Holland, Ruth Wilson etc) gave Knight the chance to explore someone a little outside the box. "He's called Locke because he's absolutely trying to apply rational morality to a situation where it just ain't going to work. You have to have some nuance, you can't just keep saying the truth! But he does."

BABA VOSS
JASON MOMOA, *SEE* (2019-'22)

A foray into fantasy, *See* takes place 300 years after a viral outbreak has rendered (almost) all people in the world blind. It centres around a sightless patriarch with a bloody past who will go to any lengths to protect his two adopted children. "I'm always looking for, 'Is a good person doing bad things for a good reason?' — I think that's where drama comes from," says Knight. "That's exactly what Baba Voss was: somebody who's trying to use his obvious physical strength for good. His first concern is the children. Baba is "father" in Turkish and Voss is a Latin-y sort of word meaning "voice". On the flight back from pitching it, I was looking through the airline magazine and there was a picture of Baba Voss! It was Jason Momoa as Aquaman, and I said, 'That's him!'" Call it a vision.



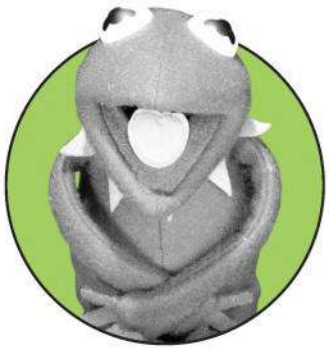
MARIA IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

THE MUPPETS



1 Kermit The Frog first appeared in 1955 on a TV show created by Jim Henson. What was that series called?

2 Twenty years later, in 1975, Muppets appeared in the debut episode of which still-running American comedy show?

3 Dr Teeth is frontman of The Electric Mayhem. Name the other five band members. Bonus point if you do a drum solo while you answer.

4 Quentin Tarantino cameos in a 2005 Muppets TV movie. What's the film's title?

5 The Muppets have appeared at the Oscars but criminally won only one — for Best Original Song in 2012. Who wrote the song and what was it called?

6 Christopher Nolan once revealed to *Empire* that his favourite Muppets are Statler and Waldorf. Which of that iconic duo is the one with the moustache?

7 Which Muppet plays Charles Dickens in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*?

8 Which comedy star plays 'Insolent Waiter' in *The Muppet Movie*?

9 We got acquainted with Kermit's evil doppelgänger, "the world's most dangerous frog", in *Muppets Most Wanted*. Name him.

10 Ricky Gervais played bad guy Dominic in the same film. But what was his surname? The answer may be sneakily concealed in this question.

11 Which Oscar-winning composer scored *Muppet Treasure Island*?

12 Only a single Muppet movie has made over $100 million at the box office. Which one?

13 "Well, it's not quite a mop, it's not quite a puppet" is a definition offered up by which (non-Muppet) TV character?

14 What is the name of the performer who took over the role of Kermit for many years, following the tragic death of Jim Henson?

15 Which of the Muppet movies was directed by Frank Oz?

16 Which actor, and general GoodFella, cameoed as a security guard who initially proves resistant to Miss Piggy's charms in *Muppets From Space*?

17 Dr Bunsen Honeydew is the Muppets' resident science genius. But what colour are his eyes?

18 How exactly do the Muppets get to London in *The Great Muppet Caper*?

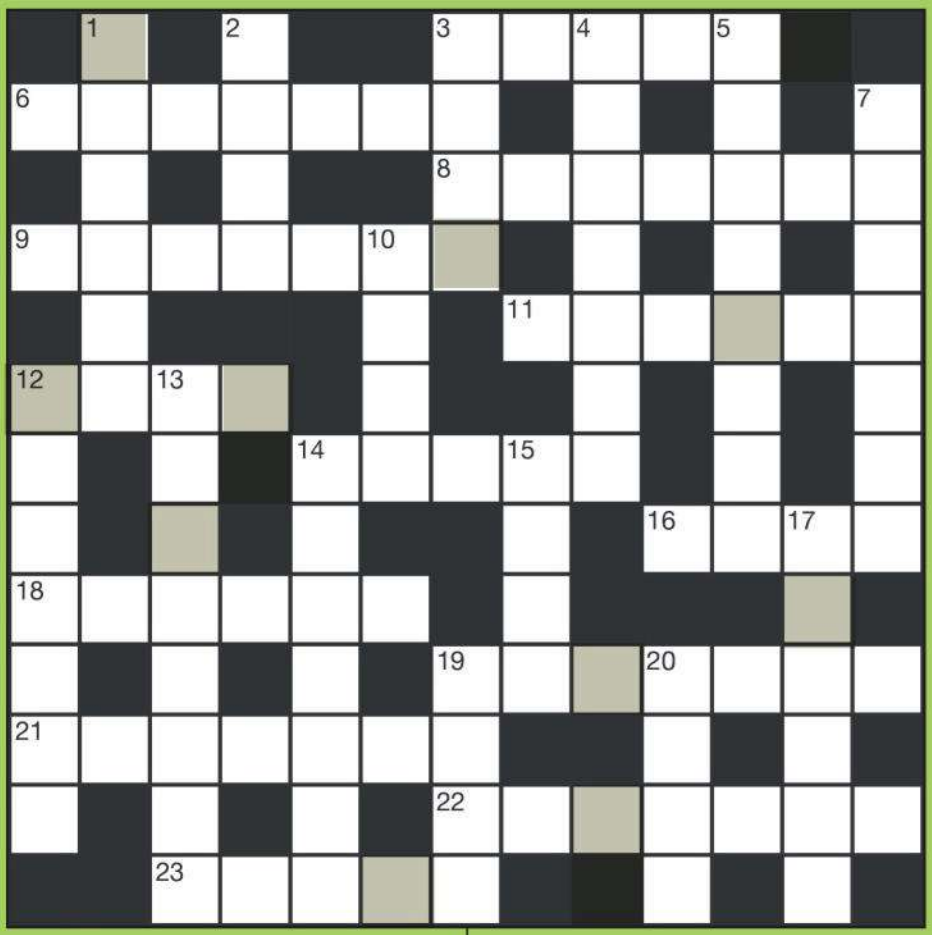
19 Which shock-rock singer hosted an episode of *The Muppet Show* in 1978, playing 'Welcome To My Nightmare'?

20 Only one Muppet has 'written' a *New York Times* bestseller. Name that Muppet.

ANSWERS **1** *Sam And Friends* **2** *Saturday Night Live* **3** Floyd, Lips, Animal, Janice, Zoot **4** *The Muppets' Wizard Of Oz* **5** Bret McKenzie, 'Man Or Muppet' **6** Waldorf **7** Gonzo **8** Steve Martin **9** Constantine **10** Badguy **11** Hans Zimmer **12** *The Muppets* (2011), which grossed $172 million **13** Homer Simpson **14** Steve Whitmire **15** *The Muppets Take Manhattan* **16** Ray Liotta **17** He doesn't have any **18** They're put in a plane's baggage hold and then thrown out mid-flight **19** Alice Cooper **20** Miss Piggy

Imago

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

3 Reckoning Pom Klementieff's playing her (5)
6 Sparks wrote the songs for this musical from Leos Carax (7)
8 Promo for a movie (7)
9/20 Down It's what Hunt was hunting for in the third *Mission: Impossible* (7,4)
11 See **16 Across**
12 Anna Kendrick's Barden Bella (4)
14 William, who directed Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in *Roman Holiday* (5)
16/11 Across In which Emma Stone is Bella Baxter (4,6)
18 Sean Penn and Robert Duvall played cops in this Dennis Hopper film (5)
19 A Soderbergh film with Don Cheadle (7)
21 Its iconic opening titles feature spiralling patterns designed by Saul Bass (7)
22 Evan Rachel Wood's *Westworld* android host (7)
23 It could describe lunch, the gun or Juliet (5)

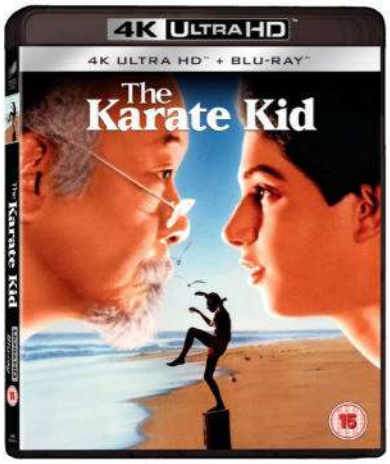
DOWN

1 A Soderbergh film with Claire Foy (6)
2 Marc, who directed this year's *Snow White* (4)
3 A 2016 animation revealed their secret life (4)
4 Jack, possibly from a not impossible Cruise-McQuarrie collaboration (7)
5 The club in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (8)
7 Film production company whose logo is a flying horse (7)
10/19 Down He's *Final Destination*'s Bludworth (4,4)
12 Underground HQ that's typically accessed from Wayne Manor (7)
13 They may be of men or the corn (8)
14 Davis, who is Wicket, Willow and a BAFTA Fellow (7)
15 — *After* (Drew Barrymore movie) (4)
17 As played by Mark Lester in a musical! (6)
19 See **10 Down**
20 See **9 Across**

COMPETITION

WIN!

THE KARATE KID ON 4K UHD



WITH *COBRA KAI* an enormo streaming hit and *Karate Kid: Legends* set to hit cinemas on 30 May, what better time to go right back to the beginning — and in glorious ultra high-def? One of cinema's best-loved martial-arts series made its debut back in 1984, with OG karate kid Daniel LaRusso — played by Ralph Macchio — moving from New Jersey to LA, only to find himself in bother with local bullies; not least Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka). Enter the iconic Mr Miyagi (Pat Morita) to show everyone what's what. *The Karate Kid* was a huge sleeper hit on release, and we have five copies on 4K UHD. To be in with a chance of winning one, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below. And remember — wax on, wax off!

***THE KARATE KID* IS OUT NOW ON 4K UHD**

COMPETITION ENDS 2 JUNE

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 2 June. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

JUNE'S ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Bees, **3** Takeshi, **9** Kinnear, **10** Vince, **11** Rebel, **13** Russell, **14** Greed, **15** Ghost, **20** Chappie, **22** Penny, **23** Alita, **24** Nielsen, **26** English, **27** Hedy. **DOWN: 1** Bikers, **2** EON, **4** Aurora, **5** Elvis, **6** Henderson, **7** Leslie, **8** Neill, **12** Barbarian, **16** Hopper, **17** McKay, **18** Dennis, **19** Sydney, **21** Pearl, **25** She. **ANAGRAM** ROY SCHEIDER

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 3 June or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Five winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winners' personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winners' details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

PEE-WEE GETS THE HORN

Pee-wee's Big Adventure

CHOSEN BY **JON WATTS**
(DIRECTOR)

Jon Watts: "I think about scenes from *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* all the time. I named my dog after Dottie, from when Pee-wee is saying, 'I *like* you, Dottie! LIKE!' You know, you get a puppy, you're never sure what they're going to grow up to be. So I wanted to pick a name that would always make me laugh, just in case she was really bad. But she's just turned one, and she's really sweet."

INT. CHUCK'S BIKE-O-RAMA — DAY

Pee-wee Herman (Paul Reubens) enters the bike shop, looking for Dottie (Elizabeth Daily), who's been working on his horn. A group of young bikers are in the store already.

DOTTIE: Hi, Pee-wee.

CHIP (Damon Martin): I say we cruise, dudes.

As they leave, some of the young bikers throw remarks at Pee-wee and Dottie. "Sure is getting hot in here!" "Steamy!" "I'm sweatin'!"

Pee-wee watches them go, and then turns to Dottie.

PEE-WEE: So, is my horn ready yet?

DOTTIE: Yeah, it's ready. Should be loud enough for you now.

PEE-WEE: Well, where is it? Let's hear it!

Dottie reaches into her pocket and pulls out a horn. Pee-wee looks at it with glee. He reaches out to grab it. Dottie snatches it away.

DOTTIE: Wait! I wanna talk to you first.

PEE-WEE: You are talking to me.

DOTTIE: No, I want your undivided attention.

Pee-wee makes a face.

DOTTIE: Look, Pee-wee, this is important! There's something I wanna ask you.

PEE-WEE: Hmm-hmm?

DOTTIE: I… (*Pee-wee murmurs again. Dottie laughs*) I wanna know if you'll do something.

PEE-WEE: What?

DOTTIE: I wanna know if you'll go someplace. With me.

PEE-WEE: Like where?

DOTTIE: The drive-in.

Pee-wee rolls his eyes.

PEE-WEE: Look, Dottie, I like you. LIKE! I LIKE YOU!

DOTTIE: That's the thing, I like you too.

PEE-WEE: (*Yelling*) DOTTIE! (*In his normal voice*) There's a lot of things about me you don't know anything about, Dottie. Things you wouldn't understand. Things you couldn't understand. Things you *shouldn't* understand.

DOTTIE: I don't understand.

PEE-WEE: You don't wanna get mixed up with a guy like me. I'm a loner, Dottie. A rebel.

He takes his horn from her.

PEE-WEE: So long, Dottie.

And then he walks out of the store. As he closes the door, he starts chuckling in delight.

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